

Kings and Clans Trilogy



DEN WARREN

Kings and Clans Trilogy

by Den Warren



*In this Volume -
Three Complete Full-Length Novels:
Kings and Clans of the Midwest
Ayanna
Independent States of America*

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About this Book

These are stories of characters who experienced the fall of the United States, and their struggles to survive, and thrive, among warring factions.

Dedication

To my Beloved Bride, my Soul Mate, my Little Bud

Foreword

These writings are entirely a work of fiction. No one knows the future, but the United States is doing everything possible to make the basis of this story a reality.

KINGS and CLANS
of The Midwest



Chapter 1

Detroit, Michigan

Month of May In the Near Future

"You do everything right your whole life. You do what everyone wants. You pay, and pay and pay. You don't get to do much of any of the things *you* want. What does it get you? The world don't play you fair. Then the world just up and thinks that having you around ain't convenient no more," Elijah said.

Plain clothes Detroit Police officers Elijah Williams and Henry Miller were partners for many years. Since they started together they had both lost hair and added some pounds, but they were still in decent shape, for their age. They had been through about everything anyone could think of over the years. They knew how to handle anything that came up.

But today they could do no more than just sit in their parked unmarked car in a daze. Elijah could feel his blood pressure spiking under the stress. It had been a half hour since the morning shift meeting got out and they were still in the precinct parking lot wordless and unanimated because of the terrible news. There was no motivation for either of them to do anything, or go anywhere.

As part of the Gang Taskforce, they usually started their day hearing the latest from the other shifts about Detroit gang activity, then they made their plans to take some kind of action to disrupt the gangs. The daily plan usually involved the officers putting their necks out a fair distance. But today the sole issue of importance was none of that. It was something they weren't supposed to worry about, their own salary.

The nation's economy had the illusion of vigor like a beautiful white swan. It was the United States of America. Land of seemingly limitless abundance and an unmatched industrial powerhouse. But the swan was filled with a tumor that was growing in size daily. Health in all ways but one is not health, but a disease. That expanding economic tumor was the decreasing value of the US dollar.

The stock market looked good. The economic indicators looked good. But the money system was already broken and waiting for a collapse. The parsec-sized national debt, was ignored by a populace happy with government handouts. The national debt caused irreparable damage to the US Dollar because there were more handouts than there was production. Treasury printing presses tried in futility to print

the funny money faster than their Congressional counterparts, who were eager to buy votes, could spend it, sending the value of the dollar into a bottomless crater.

Because of the already ruinous state of the Detroit City budget, all public employees were still waiting on their last paycheck which should have been payable two weeks ago. That check, even if they would have gotten it, was at an outdated pay rate that was now barely subsistence money. The rate of inflation in the US was about 100% a month and increasing. The City employees were all told they would get increases to keep up with the hyperinflation, but in the same breath were told a second check was not ready yet. There was a real worry that the numbers could not come out in their favor. So now the public workers had all worked for a month total with no pay.

Elijah sat slumped over with his forehead resting on the steering wheel. He looked up revealing a red arc on his forehead. "Those guys who walked out of the meeting. They said they quit. I believe them. I ain't gonna keep putting my life on the line every damn day for no money. We are so short handed now. I know it will be call call call, one stupid idiot doing one stupid idiot thing after another. I bet the Mayor still gets his money." The agony of pondering such a decision showed on Elijah's face.

He and Henry had been partners for over ten years and would have normally been in the latter stage of their career. "All those years, now nothing for retirement. No. I ain't gonna do it no more. I can't, Henry." Elijah could not look Henry in the face. "I'm gonna walk. I. . . I have to. I'm not going to be played for a fool."

"Then what 'E'?", Henry asked. "E" was the precinct's nickname for Elijah. Are you going to just sit in the dark and wait for the City to burn? The Firemen are going to walk too. This City is going to be a war zone. They are going home to protect their own families. Everyone in this town is going to lose, big time."

Elijah was staring into space as if looking through the brick wall in front of their car. "What else can we do except leave the City? We got to get out. Out of the City. Aliyah and I have been talking it over. It's time to leave Detroit, even if we have to drop everything." Elijah was anxiously bobbing his head up and down on the top of the steering wheel again. He looked up, slamming the steering wheel with both hands. "I'm calling Aliyah at the hospital and we are getting out of here." Aliyah, his wife, a nurse at the hospital, was in the middle of her shift. "We're going to go down to Cincinnati." Their long standing goal was to retire close to their daughter, Rene, but with having pensions. Even if they would have relocated before retirement, Cincy would still be their logical destination of first choice.

Aliyah Williams told Elijah that the hospital she worked for was nearly insolvent. The hospital was overrun by patients who either couldn't pay for services or wouldn't

pay, relying upon untrustworthy government payouts. Government payouts, which were always bogged down with the usual bureaucratic delays were now made more complicated by the hyperinflation.

Long waits at the hospital were already the norm before the financial crunch, but now going to get medical care was a major event, requiring taking time off work. There wasn't enough of anything to go around. Patients would get in fights with other patients, who didn't see the need for them and their sniffles to be there, causing delays for their vomiting kid or themselves to see the doctor.

Henry sat there shaking his bald head. "This is *bad*," He said, interrupting Elijah while he was getting out his phone. "I guess you're right. This town is not going to be a place for anyone to be. It's too far gone now. You're right, this crap with our checks is a game changer." Henry's voice shifted to a slightly more confident tone. "Maybe we should do something first."

"Like what?", Elijah asked peevishly, assuming Henry's proposal would not have anything whatever to do with the current crappy situation.

"Are any of 'ours' at the Mafia's Clubhouse today?" The Police had infiltrators within the various gangs. The Latin Mafia had a chapter in Detroit. This group was not affiliated with the *La Cosa Nostra* Italian mob or any other such group.

As expected, Elijah was disturbed by the question's timing. Fun facts about their work seemed totally incongruous with the ongoing quick and certain demise of their lives. "Now what does that have to do with the sun shining? What. . . you thinking about going there? Now? I swear you can be so stupid!" He shook his head and looked back at his phone. "You are gonna piss me off, I swear!"

"Can you just shut up a second?" Henry asked, holding up his hand. "I was just going to say that maybe we could do the law abiding people of Detroit one last service. Maybe we can do something that could save some lives later on. I was thinking about stopping by. Maybe it would be freakin' dope."

Ebonics coming from the whitest man in Michigan sounded so wrong. Elijah could feel his blood pressure going up a little more. He moaned in disgust, shaking his head. "You wanna *stop by* the Latin Mafia headquarters. What are we talking here, coast and toast?" Coast and toast was street slang for a drive-by shooting.

The officers had plenty of scores to settle on behalf of the City with the Latin Mafia. Henry knew that Elijah wouldn't salivate and wring his hands over the idea, but Henry knew E well enough to know he would not dismiss his idea without due consideration either.

Henry said, "E, I can just imagine the baddies all over town jumping for joy once they realize that there are no cops. This is unacceptable. It makes me so angry my gut hurts. C'mon, lets pay them a visit."

Williams looked like he might nibble on the bait.

Miller said, "Those brainless baddies do not realize there will always be someone badder than them. If there was no Detroit Police Department to protect *them* and their miserable out of control lives, they would be gutted and left for dead like the lower life forms that they are. C'mon E, remember that girl?" Henry baited E with the particularly grisly memory of a horrific premeditated rape and murder of the most innocent child imaginable carried out by the Latin Mafia. This cowardly act was committed just to get back at one of their loser rivals.

"I told you, never talk about that. Man, you are a real cornucopia of annoying bull today."

"Let's do it," Officer Henry Miller said.

Elijah said, "What are we, *Boondock Saints*? "

"Hell yea." He nudged Elijah. They had discussed several times how they loved that violent vigilante movie. They fantasized that the main characters in that flick were the two of them in real life taking on one of the local gangs.

There is a sort of practicality in the fanciful violence-solves-everything approach. Wipe out all the detestable pukes to the last man; no red tape; no crowded prisons. Bam. Done. The world is a better place.

". . . OK man," Elijah said, shaking his head after some thought. I am only doing this for you. I know I will regret this. After this we leave." Elijah relented. After all, his law enforcement career was about over. Elijah swore to himself that in his old age he would look back on his life's work and have no regrets. Doing a coast-and-toast would send a nice message to a brutal crime organization, and would be something to savor in his rocking chair days.

They both got out of the car and went to the trunk. Elijah popped it and they looked at their M-16 full auto rifles a dozen gas canisters, and a small box of flashbang stun grenades. Both of the Officers did their job with trepidation whenever they would have to use their service weapon, but they had even more apprehension whenever anything heavier was involved. There was always a chance that an innocent citizen might get in the line of fire, or someone perceived to be an innocent citizen could be hurt.

At this point there was little concern that they could find themselves in trouble. Who would be around on the Detroit City Police Department to complain about what they did, no matter what it was? With their intimate knowledge of police procedure and the Latin Mafia, and of the collapsing financial situation, they knew they could do as they please.

They took the rifles with extra magazines and a couple of tear gas canisters with them into the car. The two officers had been partners for such a long time they could practically read each others' mind. They looked at each other as if to say, "Are you sure you want to do this?" They shut the trunk and drove off to the Latin Mafia's headquarters.

Elijah asked Henry, "This is all going bad. . .I mean Detroit, right?"

"Right."

"It's not going to get better, right?"

"Right."

Elijah was shaking his head nervously. "Man, I don't know. I don't know. How did we get here?"

The gang headquarters was located in a historically low income section of the city. Other such complete sections of run down housing had been completely razed, because Detroit's rapidly decreasing population left all of the abandoned houses. They pulled up and stopped in front of the house that had been used as the Latin Mafia headquarters for years. The Police were very familiar with the house, a plain single level two bedroom place. There had been a dozen raids on it for drug trafficking in the past. The house had 10 foot high chain link fence around it. Something you would be more likely to see around a junk yard rather than a house in a residential neighborhood.

"Hey! Why are you stopping?" Elijah asked.

Henry assessed the situation, "Looks like a couple of pee-wee lookouts outside." "Pee-wees" are those who hang around gangbangers waiting for a chance to be recognized for a misdeed worthy of recruitment. Pee-wees were easy to spot. Regular LM members always wore black and red as their uniform, with caps always tilted to the left. Pee-wees, as non-members were not allowed to wear black and red.

"There's two bangers in that Impala.", Elijah added. They were slumped down in a custom lightning bug green painted 80's Chevy low rider in the driveway. "What? Why are we even here? Are we going wait to see if they are doing a deal?"

"Nope. " Henry chambered a round in the M-16, "Not today." Henry got out of the car and walked toward the house with a steady pace with the gun pointing toward the ground.

One of the bangers in the car, who were used to Police visits, said, "Hey Bitch! May I be of service?" He gave Henry the finger. It was obvious to the bangers that the two were police, even though they were not wearing police uniforms and their plain car was not marked as such. Typically, the police were powerless to use any strong arm tactics on the gang, so the gang felt little fear of the Police.

Now, things had changed completely. Without hesitation, Henry shot a burst from the hip into each of the bangers inside of the car. Blood splattered on the inside of the windshield as they tried to draw their weapons. Not stopping to appraise his handiwork, Henry immediately pointed the rifle at the pee-wees. One slipped away around the corner of the house like a scared skink and the other was summarily taken off of his feet with a massive, certainly fatal chest wound. He fell backwards into the house. He collapsed against the house and slid off leaving a smear of blood.

"Son of a . . .!", Elijah said in a panic. He jumped out of the car, almost falling down and rushed in behind Henry. He would have never imagined that they would do anything more bold than to pull up and ventilate the house and then drive away.

Elijah Williams was respected at the precinct for his special talent of being able to confidently predict how the gang would react to a proposed Police action. Elijah liked his moves to be extraordinarily well planned, if not tested in some sort of proof of concept trial. But this impromptu violent situation Henry put them in added a layer of unknown variables. Would they run or stay and fight? Would the Latin Mafia chase them afterwards? The uncertainty gave Elijah plenty of reason to worry himself sick.

Henry put a couple more rounds into the front door of the house to suppress anyone who might be planning something behind it. He turned the knob. He opened the door, firing as he went in, predictably striking another gangbanger, who dropped his oversized revolver and cell phone as he immediately fell dead. Henry went into the room

"Dang! There he goes!" Elijah followed Henry into the room. Elijah knew that Henry would soon have to switch magazines, so he tapped Henry's shoulder and made a tactical move to the front. He also knew that this assault was an extremely dangerous operation. He could hear movement in the back room down a short hall. He rushed toward the sound giving himself cover fire through the wall between him and the noise. A banger peeked around the doorway and shot at Elijah, missing. Elijah returned fire

and hastily retreated to the bathroom directly across the hall and rolled into the old slimy bathtub desperately looking for some cover.

Then Elijah saw in the bathroom mirror that Henry slipped into the famous bedroom which was converted into a shrine of all of the fallen Latin Mafia members. There were about a dozen framed pictures standing on a table. The other side of the room was also used as a tattoo parlor, equipped with all of the tattooing paraphernalia. With that room having been cleared, Henry darted back to support Elijah.

Elijah threw a gas canister into the occupied room across the hall and waited for the gas to do its job. He heard a lot of coughing and gagging. It sounded like 3 or 4 in the room. Elijah could hear one of them was trying to open the window, then was trying without success to break a window in the room.

Plaster from the interior walls went flying everywhere as random shots were being fired in his general direction. Bullets were flying through the interior walls of both of the opposing rooms and exiting the house, barely missing Elijah in the bathtub. He could have easily been hit by one of the bullets.

Henry was on his way to the scene of the gas assault when a couple of bangers came stumbling out of the gas filled room. The surrendering gangsters obviously were expecting the same soft treatment of a criminal that they had been accustomed to. They were at Henry's point blank range. Henry was obliged to administer lead poisoning to the cranium to each of them.

A young girl in a skin tight sequin covered dress came crawling out of the room through the blood and gray matter of her associates. She was gagging uncontrollably while flailing her arms and pleading for mercy.

Henry just shook his head at the gang's play toy. "Not really that sexy."

To Elijah's relief, Henry did not shoot her. That act would have crossed yet another line of brutality that would exceed his comfort level, even under these circumstances.

He always wondered what all Miller really did while he was in Afghanistan. He did know that Henry was a decorated Army Ranger. Elijah also served in the military as a Marine Corps veteran who served in Iraq. He had his own skeletons tucked away in his closet full of unmentionable monsters that he would rather not ponder or ever bring up.

Elijah exited the tub, then crouched down and made his way forward around the dead to look into the smoky room. He hoped it was over. No one was left in the room. "Oh my. . . Miller! Look!"

Henry peeked around the doorway. "Oh. . .yea, look at all of this drug crap."

"No. Over here."

Even the stoic Miller raised an eyebrow at the loot.

They both stood staring at a crate containing a Russian RPG-7 rocket propelled grenade launcher. Another case had several of the rocket grenades, typically used to combat armored vehicles, helicopters, or infantry behind fortifications.

"Cool," Henry said, "Let's load these up."

"*After* we make sure that pee-wee is gone. But we better be snappy about it before the big pants get here." It was likely that even a pee-wee was packing a weapon.

Ignoring the vomiting girl, they did a hasty inspection of the interior of the house and the outside grounds. They loaded the car with the crates containing the grenade launcher and high explosive anti tank rockets.

"That was intense," Henry said.

Elijah panted, trying to catch his breath. "What the hell are you doing going in there like that? Do you really want to die?"

"What biker club shall we visit next?" Henry asked with an inkling of some kind of demented enthusiasm.

"No!", Elijah objected. "I'm not going keep doing this until I am dead! That's it!"

"Okay, okay. . .But you know we do have this RPG now. . ."

"No! And that is final!", Elijah declared.

"Fine.", Henry replied, "But you know that Mo was not there." Mo was short for Generalissimo, the nickname of Hector Gonzalez, the Latin Mafia Chapter President.

"Well, today is his lucky day then! Let it go! Our work here is done. Detroit is done. Put a fork in it. The toothpaste is out of the tube. What if he *was* there? Dealing with him and his lackeys would be worse than a rat in your pants."

"Then I guess that is your final answer."

A short while after Williams and Miller had left, Mo Gonzalez and his entourage of 10 members arrived at the scene of the raid. The LM hierarchy, or *big pants*, were always seen wearing the black and red club colors, also they were always wearing a fortune in gold necklace. Upon seeing the carnage outside of the house, they rushed in, expecting the worst.

Upon entering the house Mo took off his sunglasses with his hand covered with gold rings. "Juanito!" He screamed. "No!" Juanito, Mo's younger brother, was the young gang member who was behind the door during the raid. Mo began to sob as he held Juanito's limp lifeless body. Then the building rage manifested itself in a war cry. "I will personally rip the guts out of whoever did this! I swear! I swear on the blood of Juanito!"

Carlos Gutierrez, who held the title of "Enforcer", shook his head. He dreaded the campaign that was about to initiate because it was his job to protect El Presidente. Carlos put his arm around Mo in a friendly manner. "You have a lot of good men. Let them like take care of it." The Latin Mafia Chapter had over 200 members at its command.

"Put the word out! Now!" Mo commanded in agreement, scrambling his minions into action.

"Si Generalissimo!", Chiva, the Vice President responded. Chiva looked like his Spanish namesake, a goat. Chiva was a skinny guy with a long beard on his chin.

One of the 'Hood Chiefs, a rank comparable to a lieutenant, announced to the room, "They took the bazooka, but they left all the cash."

Mo looked confused. "Call Andy up for some more stuff. Get a lot more this time. Get everyone around. We need to have a board meeting." The Latin Mafia had a Board of Directors and was run like a corporation.



Meanwhile, Henry Miller dropped Elijah off at the Williams's home. Aliyah rushed out and hugged Elijah tightly, burying her head in his chest, with tears streaming. Elijah and Aliyah had seriously discussed the prospects of leaving Detroit ever since the last paycheck was not paid, but the possibility of leaving did not seem real until now.

"Guess we won't have to paint the house now.", Aliyah sobbed.

"Yea," Elijah said, wiping his eyes. "Guess I won't have to fix the screen door now."

The Williams's knew that they would have a tough time getting anything out of their house in the bottomless Detroit housing market if they did put it up for sale. So their home would be like so many, physically abandoned. It would be empty now, but always full of life in their memories of far better days.

Elijah turned to Henry, "Go to your apartment and get everything you can. Food, water, ammo, whatever. We're getting out. Out for good. Then come back here and we'll head down to Cincinnati."

Elijah knew that Henry had no one at home to worry about. Henry was divorced when he was very young and had never remarried. There were no children involved in his short marriage. So Henry spent too much of his life being deeply devoted to the Police force to the exclusion of everything else.

It was a scary prospect; being a refugee. No job, no house, and a very limited amount of possessions for the remainder of their lives ahead. The situation still had the appearances of what those conditioned to the abnormal would call "normal" in Detroit. Petty crime was still pervasive; hookers paraded their wares; drug dealers and their clientele mingled indiscreetly. The regular people, many of whom were still petty criminals, were trying to survive. They hoped their lives would become more tolerable, in spite of the increasingly wonky economy, and the crime. There was still the hope by the uninformed that Detroit would remain a promising sanctuary compared to starting over elsewhere. The power of their inhibitions was a subduing effect that sustained their inertia. It's the "Devil you know" situation at work.

But the officers knew that once the word got out on the street that the cops were walking off the job, evil would be emboldened and there would be chaos beyond measure. So it became clear to the Williamses that their minds must overrule both their emotions, and any sense of duty if they were to survive. They simply had to leave, and soon, to beat the rush.

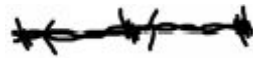
To make the looming situation in Detroit worse, the radio news said that the nuclear plant on Lake Erie would be shut down because of safety concerns related to staffing issues. Detroit's electric power would likely soon be off. A nuclear power plant that is walked out on would have a disastrous meltdown, so an intentional shutdown beforehand would be much safer. This is because if no one was there, the cooling would not be controlled, causing the core to overheat. Once the meltdown started, it would spread deadly radiation sickness among the surrounding populace.

They also heard on the news that the tunnel and bridge to Canada had been closed by Canada following mobs of fleeing Americans who had overwhelmed the border guards.

Since they tried to load as much as possible in their vehicles, the Williams's van and Henry's car were jam packed. At the start of the trip, they decided to avoid Toledo by going straight south, so they went west and around the Glass City. The plan was then to

go south and to get back on Interstate 75 south to Cincinnati, but also to avoid going through any cities that looked like problem areas; such places such as Lima or Dayton.

Elijah knew something of the northwest area Ohio because he had previously been to the Regional Jail outside of the small town of Stryker, Ohio to pick up a suspect. The suspect in custody was being extradited across the State line to face charges for a crime committed in Detroit. Officer Williams pondered while he was driving on the long trip, what things could have been like. What would it have been like if he spent his years as a small town cop in the nice peaceful Village of Stryker, compared to the stresses of the wicked City of Detroit?



All the Latin Mafia leadership was at the bullet riddled small house headquarters for a follow up meeting. The electricity in the house had gone out. Their phones were charging in their cars. The phones still had service. A frumpy looking hood chief held up his cell phone to provide light to the meeting. There was maximum gang security provided at the house ever since the raid the day before. The walls were a wreck and blood stains were all over the house. Daylight was visible through bullet holes in the exterior walls, leaving tiny patches of illumination on the floor and other places.

Seated at a table in the shrine room, the Board of Directors was made up of top ranking members, the cabinet ministers and a couple of older former members who spent most of their lives in prison, thus having lived no life apart from the gang.

Antonio, the Commerce Minister, gave his report, "I called up Andy."

Andriy Miroshnychenko, or Andy, was a local Ukrainian-born representative for a global weapons dealer. The large organization he worked for ran Russian made weapons primarily to underworld entities in North and South America.

Antonio continued, "I told Andy I want a big shipment. He said he wants hard metal only from now on, no cash."

"Why?" Mo asked.

Antonio said, "He says our money is no good. I told him the deal with no cash might be doable. When I told him that someone took our last shipment, he said no problem. He said he had a GPS chip under the crate and he had a thing where he could track it."

"No way!" Mo said, as all the others were excited. "I should be mad at him for tracking it, but this is too good."

"Yea man, he brought it over just a little while ago. Look, I got it," Antonio said. He handed the device to Mo.

Mo looked at the changing numbers on the screen. "I can't believe it. They are going south right now. Chiva! Take two hood chiefs and their men and go down and bust those bitches. Take the girl and the pee-wee with you to out them. Nobody comes back until the job is done. And I tell you this now. That pee-wee will never be a member because he ran out on Juanito instead of fighting. He will be lucky if I let him live. Juanito might be alive today if that pee-wee would have done anything but run like a little girl."

Chiva stood up from the table in obedience. "You want me to take that many men?" Chiva questioned, knowing that if the task force included his entire hood, that would amount to about 50 men.

"Yea, all. " Mo responded peevishly.

"Can I take your Escalade?" Chiva asked.

"What the hell? Take your own car." Mo said.

One of the elders spoke up, "You are going to need every man here. There is going to be a war here with all of the gangs trying to grab turf."

Mo responded, "Those Diablos who came here are the ones who not only killed Juanito, but they dared to come into this special place. For real, those guys got some *cojones grande* to come in here like that! Do you want this happening again?!"

"No," the elder replied. "That would be bad business."

Mo said, "No, we will not forget, ever! We will go after them and take them down!"

Antonio continued, "Our operations here are almost nothing right now. The money is not coming in. No one has any money or jewelry or anything we want. The money is worthless anyhow. Even the average guy in the City is getting a gun, thanks to that Chief of Police. This is not a decent place to have a gang."

Carlos the Enforcer said, "The Police are like not doing anything right now. Everyone can do what they want."

"Yea, but everything is already getting looted," said one of the hood chiefs. "There is nothing left to take."

Mo held up his finger ending the circular discussion and made his pronouncement, "The other factions in Detroit will be like fighting a war to rule over nothing. There won't be anyone left. We would be better off following Chiva."

The big pants were looking at each other. Chiva was never held up as a role model, so why would they follow him?

Carlos said, "Mo, I'm a little, like confused. Who is following Chiva?"

"Everyone. The entire chapter. We go where there is food. We take all our cars and all our people. Everyone goes. We let the bikers and Muslims and National Guard and everyone else battle over this desert here. We will be the smart ones." Mo took all of his gold chains off of his neck and tossed them to the table in front of Antonio in a heap. "This is getting heavy on my neck anyhow. Make a deal with Andy for some exceptional stuff. We need it right away. We leave as soon as this deal is done. Mo pointed for the other board members to do the same with their bling.

One by one, the big chains, rings, watches reluctantly landed on the table. They all looked no different than regular heavily tattooed rank and file members of the club.

Mo continued, "Make sure everyone takes plenty of supplies. Anyone who is like stupid or lazy about it will be left here. I don't, want anyone bringing their old lady or kid with us. If they want to do that, they can stay here." The meeting is over."

Everyone was shaken. How would the rank and file react? The City and Latin Mafia was their entire life. Some of their members had never even ventured out of the City. Why would they? But no one wanted to cross El Presidente or be left behind without the protection of the rest of their gang.

Chapter 2

Rural Armistead County, Ohio

"Man, I could just sleep. . ." Workaholic Noah Thomas was bored out of his gourd at home so it usually didn't take long after getting home until he was nodding off. In the background the TV droned on about the financial crisis. This uninteresting obsession by all of the TV programs' producers was starting to waft into one channel after another. The sports channels were all about player contracts that were made many layers more complex by the crisis. Likewise, the entertainment news had shifted from who was wearing what and hooking up with who, to the unknowable complexity of what effect the financial crisis had on their contracts. Forget about the news channels. It was either money crisis or commercials. "*Blah blah blah*. Who cares?" Noah grumbled. How bad can the economy be, he reasoned, if he was working seven days a week? Monetary policy was too abstract to worry about. Since it made no sense, it therefore must not be that important.

Besides, Noah was always told that it was not proper to talk about politics or religion at work, so he considered himself more high minded than those around him who were openly committed to their personal ideas. Like most people, Noah really never made the effort during his lifetime to form opinions on his own. Whatever he learned in public school or from Hollywood was true enough for him, and should be accepted by everyone else without question. Otherwise their minds must be closed. If he was ever pressed for his opinion on an issue, he considered it his right to verbally attack whomever it was who questioned his belief system. Again, like so many, Noah's type of open mind was a mind that was permissive toward any type of behavior, including aberrant behavior. However, his so-called open mind was strangely closed toward beliefs that appear restrictive of aberrant behavior, such as Christianity.

Noah's employer, ATG, acted like he ought to be eternally grateful for their generosity. They announced with great fanfare that they were doubling his pay, but prices such as \$27 per gallon of gasoline or a \$12 gallon of milk would still consume all of his income, raise notwithstanding. Few in the country had much to spend on anything discretionary. The car companies ATG was making parts for were increasingly being exported to foreign car makers instead of domestic companies. Noah was worried that it was just a matter of time until it would be cheaper for all auto makers to build the cars nearer to their customers, then in turn find local suppliers instead of buying from ATG.

Although it was the weekend, there was often no end to the work week for Noah Thomas. This weekend his boss more or less *voluntold* him to show up Saturday and Sunday to work on a chronic engineering issue related to a new model part, and to reprogram a robot. It's not that he really had much of a life apart from work anyway, but he couldn't make plans with the family very often without disappointing them.

Noah still had his work uniform on, filthy from coolant and metal chips. Laying face down on the floor on his big belly with the TV remote in his hand, he was just about out. He wanted to play with the boys, but he was wiped out.

"Noah!", Sophia called from the front room.

"Huh?"

"There's some pretty yellow flowers in the front yard." Sophia liked to point out blooming dandelions in the springtime with the expectation that Noah would immediately get up and spray some herbicide on them.

"So? The organic people don't care, so why should we?" Noah liked to point out that the their neighbors across the road, the Crawfords, didn't spray their weeds. The Crawfords had a big garden, some utility buildings among other redneck looking amenities. The centerpiece was the flagpole, which flew the yellow Gadsden "Don't Tread on Me" flag, with the serpent. The flag that is typically associated with Tea Party rallies. For some reason, the Crawfords must have thought the Gadsden was a classier flag than the Dixie Battle Flag.

Sophia could see Phil Crawford outside doing something around the garden. That was so much work for veggies anyone could just buy at the grocery. Admittedly, it was nice that they would occasionally bring over some fresh vegetables. "Really? Noah! Come look at this! That wackjob finally has lost it!"

It was not so common to see Amy Crawford out there with Phil. The Thomases concluded Phil and Amy didn't get along. Amy was out in the yard standing with her hands on her abundant hips supervising whatever Phil was doing.

Noah hobbled over to the window with the remote still in his hand. "He's trying to fix those mole hills. Is that where they get 'Making mountains out of mole hills?' ", he punned in reference to Sophia's over dramatization.

"No, look! He's digging up perfectly good grass all around his yard. He's making those mole hills." Sophia took a picture with her phone. "I'm sending this to Marsha."

"Yeah, well I've got a ton of other boredom to catch up on." Then he walked away.

"That's how the remote keeps getting lost!" She complained.

Their neighborhood on Harris Road consisted of a cluster of a dozen newer houses. Each lot in the development had a spacious acre and a half, which probably represented the maximum amount of lawn that the average home owner would feel like mowing on a riding mower. The other nearest neighbors were all farms. The Thomases pretty much were social with all of their neighbors in the cluster of houses except those oddballs across Harris Road. They were certain the Crawfords held beliefs they would find offensive, so they had no inclination to get to know them more closely.



The next week everything happened all at once. Noah arrived at work as he did every other day at Ashita Technologies Group near Shanesville to find out he was "temporarily" put on leave. There were a few stunned co-workers sitting around speculating about their fate out in the parking lot. A group of bewildered Japanese advisors were gathered at the outside smoking area. There were several 18-wheelers sitting around waiting to be loaded or unloaded. No one knew much of anything else, so Noah left.

The drive home set Noah's mind racing. He was like a fish out of water without work to occupy his every thought and action. There already was not enough money in the household, now this interruption in his income stream. Sophia was a stay-at-home mom. She watched Liam, their youngest who was 4 years old. Hunter, the oldest, had been in school a few years already.

"What?!" Sophia said to Noah. "You home already?"

"Yea. The plant is shut down. I was put on temporary leave."

"Huh? What does that mean?"

"How am I supposed to know? That's all they said."

Sophia was stunned to silence for a moment. Then she said, "We need money to pay our bills. So how do we make our plans?"

"Are you asking me?"

"Really? What? I have to get a job now?"

"What are you talking about? There's no jobs out there. You can't get a job that pays enough to cover all of the high prices. We just have to wait until they call me back."

"I don't like it."

"So what am I supposed to do about it? It wasn't my idea." Noah retreated to the living room. Out of habit he turned on the news channel.

Later, Sophia joined him. They sat together; closer than usual without much discussion.

The unemployment shockwaves were spreading throughout the gridlocked economy as there was no reliable currency to buy and sell with. Within the space of a single day, there was a harmonic convergence of bad economic news. The National unemployment rate went to over 90+%. The ill-behaved have-nots used the circumstances as an justification to loot the stores.

Sophia asked, "Why is it that no matter what the cause of the riot is, they always go for the TVs?" Sophia started to wonder if the pandemonium would reach them. "Noah, what are we going to do?"

He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. When you work all of the time, you only plan on going to work. You learn not to make any other plans. For the workaholic, the aberrant lifestyle of work holism provides a sanctuary from all other responsibilities under the guise of sacrificing for one's own family.

About all the Thomas family accomplished the rest of the day was glaring at the television news. It became obvious by the talking heads' repetitive comments, and the sparse information, that an increasing number of those news people were staying home.

The US President made some announcements. He wanted to expand the role and size of the Federal Protective Services, which now amounted to a national police force. The President directed this through executive order, and declared the force was of critical importance, so any law to the contrary must be ignored.

But the gutless opposition party to the POTUS did not stand their ground and impeach him for this unconstitutional act and all of his other illegal acts. Instead, all they could muster were some whiney arguments that the FPS would be plagued with deserters. The reason for the desertions was that the FPS/Homeland Security officers would fear for the safety of their own families. They would stay home instead of undertaking the hopelessly futile operations they would be asked to do.

In another desperate attempt to save the Union, the President invited the United Nations to send a force to help restore order. This was thought to be illegal by many as well, but the situation was "An grave emergency that was too important to ignore."

That evening there was no point in watching any more repetitive news, so they concluded the day's activities by popping in a few DVD movies to watch.

The next day Noah tried to call work a few times and there was no answer, so he went outside to spray the dandelions. Noah couldn't figure out if the sprayer was plugged up or broken, so he abandoned the task. He looked across the road. Phil was

out and busy doing more digging and toiling. That was a hobby that was definitely not for him.

The boys were just starting to get up and run around. Sophia got a call on her cell phone saying that their school had been closed for the day.

Then the lights went out. There was no storm, no downed power lines, but still no power. The TV, and the game console, which were all a big part of the family's life support system were now out of commission. It was not that uncommon of an event to have a power outage. It happened a few times a year and was seldom longer than a couple of hours. So no one panicked, or took any extraordinary measures to do any preparing for a long term outage.

People in the area went to bed that night with the power out. The power was still not back on when they started waking up the next day. They all sat in the darkened room together, lost without their intentional distractions. Sophia and Noah had to recharge their phones in their cars. Even Hunter had his own phone, but their phone service was down, making the smartness to their smart phones unavailable. There were still a few radio channels on the air with news in their cars. They went out there to listen occasionally. There was no comfort to be found on any of the radio news reports. The word given was mostly business and other closings, but also talk of riots and looting, then home invasions. Everyone was urged to stay home.

"Wait a minute. . ." Noah said, "What if the power *never* comes back on? What if the electric company guys are all sitting at home like us?"

Sophia was stunned as she came to the realization that such an unthinkable possibility could be happening. Given the severity of the recent diverse events, no scenario could be dismissed. Just because things were bad, did not mean they could not get worse. "I . . . I never thought of that. We have to do something."

Noah said, " You know, though, things have a way of resetting themselves. I wouldn't worry too much about it. It will be all right. I shouldn't have said anything."

They could hear vehicle doors closing outside. Looking out the window, they could see the Crawfords had company. A very old truck pulling an enclosed trailer was in the driveway. Also, there was a small beat up car.

"There's a black guy over there," Sophia said. "He's with a white woman. There's another new guy over there; a young guy with a do-rag. They look like they are up to something." It seemed to her that the Crawfords were acting extra strange because the circumstances brought out extra strangeness in them.

Seeing someone black at the Crawfords surprised them both, because they had always heard and believed that Tea Party types were either openly racist, or racists in denial, and not many blacks lived in the entire county, so why would he go there?

"What are they up to?" Noah asked. He turned to his sons who had nothing better to do with no power in the house than to hang with their parents. "Okay, tell you what, boys, the freezer is not going to keep the food forever. We may as well start eating it.

"Ice cream!" Hunter declared. He tore off toward the kitchen.

"Already?" Sophia normally would not approve of ice cream for breakfast.

Liam followed, going straight for the bowls and spoons.

Sophia's concern was ever increasing. She shook her head. "Noah. . ."

"Okay, if the power is not back on by tomorrow, we'll come up with some kind of a plan, but probably everything will be back to normal. It always is. Once the power is on, things can straighten themselves out."



The next day the power was still not back on. There were no broadcasts on the car radio. Not even the hiss of a transmission. All of the TV channels had a "no signal" box appear. Where was that stupid Emergency Broadcast System when you need it? Noah started up the grill and made a feast out of thawed out meat from their freezer.

Sophia looked out the front window. "Oh no!"

"What?" Noah asked frantically. The boys came running to see what was happening.

"Look at the Crawfords's front window." The window had a large piece of a corrugated box duct taped to it. The cardboard had "Keep Out!!!" written on it with black spray paint in large letters.

"Oh man!" Noah said, seeing Phil and the other do-rag white guy digging a very large hole in the front yard. "Somebody broke into their house and they killed him and now they are burying him! I know they are government haters and all, but that guy deserved a fair trial!"

Hunter said, "If he broke into the house he *should* be killed."

"Yea! Pow! pow! Gotcha!" Liam added running around.

"That's not how it works boys," Noah tried to explain to his sons, but the boys were running around reenacting the scene of the alleged crime.

"Noah. Are we going to do anything today?" Sophia asked in an insistent way.

"In other words, you mean 'me'".

"Whatever. Go talk to the neighbors. . .except the Crawfords. I'll stay here with the boys. You go."

"I wanna go!" Hunter said.

"Okay," Sophia consented, "but not to Crawford's. Something is not right."

Noah, Hunter and their dog Chuck went around knocking on everyone's door in the subdivision. He told all who he spoke to there would be a meeting in an hour in the Thomas's back yard. One of the houses was either vacant or no one would answer the door. But there were a million reasons why someone would not be at home.

Hunter was glad to get out of their dark house with nothing electronically-based to do. It was different just to walk around outside. A couple of the places in the neighborhood had young boys who he was friends with. Even now they talked about the latest game or what achievements they had accomplished playing a game.

Hunter thought the meeting organizing campaign was all well and good until they got to Mrs. Welch's house, who was talking forever about boring stuff.

Mrs. Welch was an older widow who had physical problems and a plethora of other issues to discuss in detail. She usually had her daughter from Delburg come over to help her out every other day or so with chores or whims, but her Daughter had not made an appearance there since the power had gone out. Noah kept telling himself he should be interested in the critical points of her minutia, even though he wasn't. "It's always something, isn't it?" he would tell her after every couple of minutes or so.

Since Mrs. Welch's property was beside the Crawford's property, Hunter saw this as an opportunity to casually wander over and do some snooping. "Hi Phil."

"Hi Hunter," Phil said. They had spoken several times recently.

"Did somebody break into your house?"

"Nope," Phil replied.

"Why is that cardboard on the window?"

"It's on there so nobody will break in."

"Oh. So you didn't shoot anyone?"

"No, not yet." Phil smirked, pleased that his countermeasure had the desired effect.

Noah didn't see Hunter and looked around for him. "Aw. . .c'mon." He said to himself after he spotted him. "Sorry Mrs. Welch, I gotta run. See you in a bit." It would not be a very good piece of neighborly relations to call Hunter back from Phil's so he and Chuck crossed the Crawford property line.

"Hi Phil." All the men had not done any recent shaving. Phil was close to retirement age, so his beard was coming in almost completely white.

"Noah. How's it going?" As usual, Phil spoke with a warm and friendly tone.

"Just waiting for the power to go back on," he replied, not knowing if Phil's question was rhetorical or not. "Too bad about your robbery. Did they get anything?"

"No, there was no robbery. You're right though, this power outage is a real pain. I'm not going to hold my breath though."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, not to be overly negative, but who's to say if it will come back on or not?"

"Look. . . Phil, we are having this neighborhood meeting about what to do. You can come to it if you want."

"Oh, well thanks so much, but I'm busy right now. My friends and I are trying to get some work done here. We'll talk some later though, Okay?"

"Sure Phil. Alright then. I'll let you guys get back to. . . whatever it is you were doing. Hunter, we gotta get you back to help Mom. C'mon Chuck!"

Hunter and Chuck were standing by the corrugate covered window and ran toward Noah.

Soon the neighborhood meeting convened in the Thomas's back yard, with a good attendance of about 30.

"Sophia!" Noah beckoned her toward the back yard through the back door. "The meeting is starting now."

"We can't come," She said. "Go ahead and have it."

Noah went in the house. "Hey! I need you out there."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't have any makeup on."

"No one else does either! Just get out there!"

"Okay! Okay!"

Noah was comfortable with meetings in general since he facilitated them several times a week at work, but never a meeting anything like this. Since Noah organized the meeting he spoke first. "Okay, we are having this meeting so we can figure out an action plan for what is going on."

"I need my prescription," Mrs. Welch declared, loud enough for everyone to hear.

People started making declarations about their needs. Food, water, gasoline, and information.

Sophia added, "Protection!" Then she looked around to see if anyone was noticing that she was without makeup. Once she saw none of the others did, she relaxed a little.

One woman told the group, "We just come back from town today and the stores were all closed. It looked like the grocery was looted."

A hubbub went through the group. It was incredible that such a thing would or could ever happen in Delburg.

"Okay," Noah was feeling overwhelmed, "Who wants to be our leader? Come on. . we can vote."

The neighborhood was vocal about their consensus to make Noah leader, telling him he was doing a good job.

Noah dropped his head for a moment resigning to the fact he would have to take charge over the impossible situation. "Let's get a group to go into Delburg and see if we can get some supplies and information. Let's meet here every day at about this time. Feel free to use our backyard as a gathering place. Bring your lawn chairs over."

"So, who wants to go uptown?" Noah asked.

"I've got a shotgun, I'll go," Dave said.

"Me too," said Dan. "I got a .45." Dan was a guy who was about 100 pounds overweight and a heavy smoker. "I need cigarettes."

"Do we really need guns? We want to be part of the solution, not the problem. I can honestly say that I have never fired a gun," Noah said.

Dan said, "The stores are looted. You know some, or maybe all of them looters had guns. Most of us do have some kind of a firearm. I'm not going in there unarmed."

"Alright. Maybe us 3 are enough for this trip," Noah suggested. "We'll give everyone a full report when we get back."

They climbed into Dave's rusty old white pickup truck. On the way uptown they could see that members of the House of Crawford were putting barbed wire entanglements in their back yard which bordered a 10 acre woodlot.

Dave said, "Now there's a guy who knows what he is doing."

"You think so?" Noah asked. "Maybe I missed something."

"Maybe we all did," Dan said.

Noah rolled his eyes privately at the cryptic comments. He was unwilling to give Phil any credit for knowing anything.

It was about a four mile trip to Delburg from the neighborhood. On the way they saw a burned out farmhouse still smoldering.

"Wonder what happened there?" Noah asked.

"We probably wouldn't want to know," Dan said.

"No, actually, I think we would," Noah said. But Dave didn't stop.

There were several other such smoldering points of unknown origin off in the distance marking the skyline of Delburg, a small town of a few thousand souls. At the Delburg Corporation Limits they came to a car that was blocking both lanes. Two men with rifles were standing next to the car. Dave slowed the truck to a stop.

"We want to go to town," Dave said.

One of the men with rifles said, "Nope. Nobody gets in."

"Why?" Dave asked the sentry.

Noah told Dave, "They can't just keep us out. They don't own the road."

"Just leave," the guard said. "Anyone caught coming in will be shot."

Dave looked at Noah and said under his breath, "I think we can take them."

"No. We cannot *take* them," Noah said.

Dan agreed. "That is not a good idea."

Noah said, "Just see if you can get some info."

Dave asked, "Can you please tell me any news?"

"Well, were not supposed to say anything, but it is a big mess in town. You don't want any part of it, so its best for you if you turn around."

"Who's in charge?" Dave followed up.

"The Mayor and I guess, the Chief of Police. You better get going."

"Can we at least get some medicine?"

"No. Leave now."

Dave rolled up the window and turned the car around. "A-holes. Maybe we should try a different road into town."

Dan said, "If it is blocked out here on Podunk Pike then the other roads are plenty more blocked. Damn it! I need a smoke!"

Noah said, "What am I supposed to tell everyone? There is no good news anywhere? How did this all happen?"

Chapter 3

Williams's van was followed by Henry Miller's car southbound down I-75 in northwest Ohio south of Lima. About every mile, there was an abandoned car or two on the side of the road. They passed an 18 wheeler that had jackknifed. The truck looked as if it had been looted.

"How you doin' 'Leyah?" Elijah asked.

"I just pray we get to Cincy alright. I wouldn't refuse a snack though."

"There's some food in the back. You want me to pull over and get you something?"

"No way. We'll get there soon enough."

"Look!" Aliyah pointed out the car window at an armed man. They caught a glimpse of another man who was punching a hole in a newer car's gas tank with a hammer and chisel, running the gas into a bucket. The apparent owners of the car, an older couple, were standing helplessly by.

Elijah saw this as a reason to speed up, not to stop. It felt strange, not making an effort to help someone in need. Strangely bad. He played in his mind what would have happened there. The risk to Aliyah was too great. He had to dismiss the scene from his head, hoping that the gas takers were somehow trying to help the couple.

Elijah knew people were dying and killing each other all over the Country at an incalculable pace. It certainly looked like it may be the demise of the United States. He wondered why Aliyah and him should think their fate would end up any different than everyone else?

Aliyah gave him that look. The look that she had confidence in him. He would not allow them to go down without a supreme effort.

"So far so good," Elijah sighed. The look gave him a little confidence. Each second in the car got them a little closer to what they hoped would be a sanctuary, and a warm embrace from their daughter and son-in-law.

Looking at her rear view mirror, Aliyah kept tabs on Henry. "He's still there. 'Lijah, he's got his turn signal on and is waving at us."

Elijah put on his signal to pull over and Henry followed.

Henry got out of his car. "E, I got no gas. I'm on vapors."

"Damn!" Elijah cursed. "I ain't got much neither. We can't make it to Cincy without some more gas." Every gas station they passed had a price posted as \$99.99 per gallon. So either those stations didn't have any gas or that was the actual price, or that was as high of a price as their sign would go. Either way, they did not have the gas to make it another two hours driving.

Henry suggested, "Can't we stay some place local?"

"There's no motels," Aliyah said. "This is scary."

Elijah said, "I know Baby. If we have to, we just gotta sleep in the cars tonight until we can get some gas." He looked at Henry. "Next exit we'll get off and just have to see what's there."

"K," Henry said.

The white on green highway sign said the next exit was only a few miles. They took the off ramp. The sign at the exit read; Shanesville 6 miles east, or Delburg 4 miles west.

"Delburg is closer," Elijah reasoned. Stopping two miles sooner might make all the difference.

The fuel situation was becoming more stressful now than ever. With each passing second the gasoline trouble was closer to some type of temporary or permanent resolution. Henry had not run out of gas yet. If he did, all of his stuff would be left in the open, attracting marauders like the ones they had seen all along the way. Each mile travelled was another dice roll with decreasing odds.

"Stop 'Lija! Stop!" Aliyah urged as she could see the road blocked by cars up ahead with armed men around them.

"Okay, I don't want no part of that," Elijah said. There was a back road crossing the road they were on. "This is it. Right or Left?"

"I don't. . ."

"There's a woods up to the left." Elijah turned the car left and hoped for the best. Henry was still bringing up the rear. Instead of seeing an idyllic woodland setting, they saw a cluster of newer houses in front of the woods on the right, and more houses on the left with a large open field behind them.

They saw the Crawford house that sat in the middle of the subdivision. By now it had barbed wire completely around the property line. They saw the "Keep Out!" and the Gadsden flag.

"Nooooo no no no. Uh uh." Aliyah said. "Remember that place in that horror movie?"

So they crept a little further in their cars to distance themselves from the Crawfords place and pulled into a pleasant looking little house.

Dan came out with his .45 pistol in his hand pointed toward the ground.

Aliyah said, "He's got a gun! Let's get out!"

Elijah said, "Calm down, Baby. He's just worried like everyone else."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," He said, but "No" he thought.

Henry took the lead on this meeting. He got out of the car, holding his hands open. "Excuse me sir, we were wondering if we could park our cars here overnight?"

Seeing the plates on their car, he asked, "What brings you all the way down here from Michigan?"

Henry answered, "We're on our way to Cincinnati. You wouldn't happen to have any gas, would you?"

"Sorry," Dan answered. "You wouldn't happen to have any cigarettes, would you?"

The appearance of two strange vehicles arriving in the neighborhood drew the attention of many with their heightened anxieties. So all they did was cautiously watch everyone else. Dave showed up at Dan's with his shotgun. Others, feeling more confident because of Dave and Dan's armed response were gathering around.



While on I-75 Chiva made the comment, "Man it is weirdly beautifully. . . weird out here. You can see a long ways. So much trees and fields." Most of the nine cars in the caravan were getting low on gas. He looked at the GPS device. "Hey. It stopped again. I wonder if it is broke or something."

"Maybe they just stopped the car," his driver suggested.

"Hey. You're going the wrong way," Chiva said.

"Let me see that thing. We gotta get off the highway and go back, I guess."

"Vato, you need to recalculate," was Chiva's expert VP opinion.

The LM task force got off of the Interstate and went down some township roads trying to match the coordinates of the RPG crate.

"You sure you know where you are going?" Chiva asked.

"I'm good, boss."

People were sitting around talking in the forum behind the Thomas's house. Everyone was getting to know, and warming up to the visitors from Michigan. Once they believed Henry and Elijah were police officers, and Aliyah was a nurse, their minds were put at ease.

Blang! Blang! A mid-sized bell was rang twice. People were looking at each other. That was the first time they had heard a bell in the neighborhood. The sound was coming from the Crawfords's backyard. All the leashed dogs in the area started barking, including Chuck.

A young, trim white male with the do-rag and the same beard as all the other men appeared around the corner of the house. He was holding an AR-15."

Some of the people gasped at the sight of the gun.

The armed man shouted, "Quick! Everyone get into your homes! Right now!"

"Why?" Dan asked.

"Move!" Do-rag commanded.

"I think he means it," Noah said. "We better run."

Those who could run back to their houses quickly did so. Many of the others went directly into the Thomas's house.

Within two minutes, nine cars slowed and stopped in the middle of the subdivision. All of the Latin Mafia bangers started to get out of their cars, with all types of firearms. Terrified people were peeking out of their windows. There was no way to call the Sheriff.

Elijah looked around the corner at the convoy immediately recognizing the Latin Mafia. How was this even possible? "Damn it Henry! I knew I was going to regret it!"

"Regret what?" Aliyah was both scared and confused.

Elijah drew his 9mm from his breast holster. This was the worst situation imaginable, certain to have the most horrifying outcome conceivable. It was too late to

run. He motioned for Aliyah to get down behind the back wall of the house while he was intermittently peeking around the corner.

Dave's house was couple of houses away from the Thomas place, on the same side of the road. Dave came out with his shotgun. "You boys got no business here! Go on! Get out!"

A withering hailstorm of gunfire from the Mafia was directed at Dave. His body danced in an aura of pink mist and lopped to the ground.

The Gang's gunfire then was turned to the houses on the Thomas's side of the road. Everyone in their homes ducked for cover as bullets ripped through the walls and windows.

Elijah started firing into the target rich environment, dropping unsuspecting LM members who didn't distinguish the return fire.

Suddenly it sounded like he was back in Iraq as the already busy gunshot frequency tripled. After a second quick look, he could see shots were being fired from every front window of the Crawford House except the covered one.

Ten meters from the intruders, two fighters popped up out of the ground in the Crawfords's front yard from a "spider hole". A hole that was dug then covered with a plywood sheet and covered with some sod for concealment.

There was so much shooting zipping in his direction from across the road that Elijah just stayed prone and looked for targets of opportunity around the back corner of the house.

Machinegun fire also raked the red and black intruders' position from front to back. This was coming from Dan, who was using Henry's M-16. Not being used to an automatic weapon, he quickly spent the magazine, then switched back to his .45 pistol. Dan was getting shot at by a couple of the gangsters. He was using the Williams van and Henry Miller's car for cover, moving back and forth. Bullets were hitting the vehicles and whizzing overhead.

The Bangers lost the initiative and were being routed. They did not know whether to get back into their cars or charge into the houses. They were dropping everywhere, and their indecision made their circumstances far worse.

Sssssssshoooooshhh! A high explosive anti-tank rocket propelled grenade came from an angle at the back of the car convoy. Its payload struck the third car from the front of the fleet. The car exploded into flames. A gangster running near the car became

a human torch when it lit up. He screamed and stumbled a few feet and his burning flesh fell to the ground.

Elijah knew from the sound of the rocket what had happened. "Henry!" He was pumped with adrenalin after realizing they were now winning in a rout. Caught up in the moment, he decided to charge from his position and exploit the situation. He saw the lead car and the second car pulling away. He fired at the second car but it there was no good shot.

The third car in the procession was engulfed in flames so the other cars were trapped in a double-park of death. The mop-up continued until all were dead. No prisoners were taken. In all, 37 gangbangers were KIA.

Dave was the only direct combat casualty in the rout. Sadly, a young mother who was cowering in a house was struck and killed and three others had some minor appendage injuries. People were crying and sobbing everywhere, embracing each other. They lamented the deaths, but were astonished that they somehow survived.

Dan walked slowly to the place where his buddy Dave was gunned down. A couple of people were wrapping his destroyed body. Dave's young widow tearfully handed Dan the old shotgun that Dave was using to protect his family and neighbors. Neighbors hugged her praising Dave for his courage.

Elijah found Aliyah and they waved to each other. Elijah knew Aliyah would have to get busy with the wounded.

Elijah made eye contact with Henry, who was in the adjacent lot farther away from the action. He gave Miller a casual salute for the RPG shot. Henry returned the salute.

Aliyah was working on the wounded with bandages made from a bed sheet. There was no anesthesia, so helpers tried to quiet those is pain.

While busy working, she met Tammy who also stepped up to help. Tammy was also a nurse. She worked in obstetrics at the Armistead County Hospital. Fortunately, on this day they did not have to do any surgery on gunshot victims. The injuries were all from falls and flying debris.

Elijah's van and Henry's car were riddled with bullets. Engine oil and radiator fluid were drooling onto Dan's driveway. They lifted the hoods and could see that the cars were totaled. Multiple essential components were punctured with bullet holes that were intended for Dan. Elijah shook his head, wondering what he would tell Aliyah. At least they could still live in their immobile vehicles. Maybe some of the car's parts could be salvaged for barter. What little gas they had left was of extreme value, but there was extremely little of it.

The men in the spider hole finally got their nerves together from the intense close combat and climbed out. They were calling the do-rag guy "Angel", and the other guy was the black guy who lived at Crawford's. The duo suffered no casualties and went back to the house to check on their family and friends.

Others were scavenging the corpses and the cars.

Elijah saw that the gang still had an affinity toward pimped weapons that looked badass but were technically not sound in neither accuracy nor dependability or both. Nevertheless, these pieces were good for those in the community who had nothing else to protect themselves.

Weapons were being passed out to whoever showed some interest. Further scavenging took place to match ammunition with weapon. Some were real glad to get the weapons. Others, including Noah and Sophia were more reluctant, but felt they had no choice. They had no clue about even handling the heavy objects.

Other more ambitious scavengers were soon going through the cars in detail, and siphoning out any gas that didn't burn up in the skirmish.

Elijah's original impression of the Crawford house occupants changed considerably after they counterattacked the Latin Mafia. His opinion changed some more as he noticed a black man across the road. He walked the length of the barbed wire and approached the driveway, where an armed sentry stood.

"Permission to enter?" he requested.

"State your business."

"Talk to the black guy."

"Jayden!" the sentry called. "Go ahead," he said to Elijah.

Elijah pulled Jayden aside. "These people over here tell me they are about out of food. I'm guessing there is plenty of food over here."

"We don't donate food," Jayden said. "If we did, we would be as bad off as them."

"What happened to 'share and share alike?'"

Jayden replied, "You need to talk to Phil. Stay here." Jayden showed no interest in getting to know Elijah or continuing the discussion.

Elijah stopped Jayden and said, "Phil needs to go talk to Noah, not me. " He pointed at the house across the road.

"Phil doesn't *need* to talk to anyone. The way it sounds to me is that Noah *needs* to talk to Phil."

"We'll be in Noah's back yard. That house over there," Elijah said.

"Fine," Jayden said. Get the entire community around and well be over before the end of the day. All these cars with Michigan plates." He pointed at the invaders' vehicles. "They know you or something?"

"We're acquaintances," Elijah reluctantly admitted.

Chapter 4

Phil and Jayden were the only ones from the Crawford's house who to come to the backyard forum area later in the day of the skirmish with the Latin Mafia.

"Hello, my name is Phil Crawford. Some of you know me already. I own the house across the road. I am the leader of the group in the house. This is my friend and associate Jayden Phipps. I have been wanting to talk to everyone, but I have been busy as you know, and always will be from here on out. On the other hand, it seems like you all over here have been avoiding us."

Sophia and Noah stole a quick glance at each other. "Oh, no. Not really," they muttered barely audibly to each other.

Phil continued, "Now, there are a couple of other things I must get out of the way for my own personal satisfaction. First; I am angry with you, as a group. You and millions of Americans like you have done nothing to prepare for any of this. Our group has seen this coming for a long time, and we took action while you were spending your free time goofing off and enjoying yourselves. Some of you cast your votes for politicians who ran the country into the ground while you ignorantly, or conveniently believed their lies. Meanwhile you were looking down your noses at us and lying about us. We, meaning the group in my house are the minority who were paying attention. We saw plainly what was going on. Not only did you not do any preparing, but we fix the blame for this entire mess on some of you. What you did before now may not ever be entirely forgotten."

"Secondly; Never ask us for anything. We will not promise anything to you. We are not like your nanny government you kept trying to vote for. Our idea of sharing is not the same as yours. If you take it upon yourself to help yourself to anything of ours you will be summarily shot on the spot. So, if I were you, I wouldn't test me."

"Thirdly; We want all of you to survive and be successful. Honestly, we know you don't know what the hell you are doing. It pretty much shows. But we want to share our knowledge with you. We want to work with you and provide protection. If you don't want our help, then we will just leave each other alone. So I want to ask you, will you work with us?"

Hunter jumped up enthusiastically. "Yes Phil!" Hunter admired Phil now more than ever.

"Thanks Hunter," Phil smiled at his young friend.

Sophia tried to pull Hunter back down, she had never despised Phil any more than now. Noah subdued Hunter by pulling down his other arm.

Noah thought what he had just heard was either the worst political speech ever, or some kind of protection racket scheme. No matter, this deal had a lot better potential than anything he was going to be able come up with at this point by himself.

Elijah couldn't believe his ears. Those selfish bastards across the road gathered everyone together to tell them, "no, they weren't going to help them", but also how much they don't like the beggars. "That takes some nerve" he whispered to Aliyah, who nodded in agreement.

Dan muttered, "Hell."

Jayden held his ear forward with his hand and asked, "You say something?"

Dan, fearing some kind of retribution, stood up, "I said, '*hail* to the King'."

Phil smiled, "I don't know about *King*, but my wife sure is the *Queen*."

Noah spoke so everyone could hear. "Phil, why don't we vote on what to do. You know, like a democracy. . .so everyone has a say."

Phil said, "Noah, if that is what you want, please do so. I'll be at my place working if you change your minds." Phil turned to Jayden, "Let's go."

Jayden said, "I told you this was a bad idea."

A large hairy man in the crowd with a *Pittsburg Steelers* shirt on yelled, "Hey! We need some food here! It our right to a good meal just like everyone else!"

Phil said, "What is the basis for this 'right' of yours?"

The hairy man said, "We're out of food and you have plenty! C'mon everybody! Let's go over there and get our share!"

Phil said, "Did you forget already what I said? Never ask for anything from us."

There was some hostile chatter agreeing with the hairy guy among a few of the people.

"We're not asking! You can't stop us all!" The hairy man proclaimed. The crowd found no fault with his reasoning and looked more hostile.

Without warning, Jayden pulled his 9mm Glock hand gun and shot the man twice in the chest and once in the head.

Those in the crowd were stunned to silence at the killing; staring at Jayden; staring and the deceased. Some women screamed but everyone was frozen in place.

Elijah pulled his service weapon and pointed it at Jayden. "You need to drop your weapon."

Jayden and Phil both pointed their hand guns at Elijah.

Henry pointed his pistol at Phil.

"Need?" Jayden asked rhetorically.

Phil said, "Didn't you learn anything this afternoon? What are you, one of those guys who doesn't believe that we should have the right to defend ourselves?"

Elijah said, "Defend yourselves?! He ain't done anything!" Elijah's gun was still pointed at Jayden.

Phil said, "He only wanted to invite all of you come across the road and steal from our hard work. Who would have stopped him? . . . You? Things are different now! We will not overlook threats! Am I clear?"

Elijah said, "We've done this a dozen times and at the end of the day we always go home."

Angel came around the corner of Thomas's house with his AR-15 pointed at Elijah.

Jayden said, "If you want to keep that streak going, then you'll listen. I'm gonna give you no more than two seconds to drop your gun or you can sleep next to Steelers over there."

Aliyah was between Elijah and Henry. She slowly reached up and slowly pulled their arms down at the elbow. She told everyone, "We've all had a very busy day here. We are all pretty worked up."

Phil, Jayden and Angel stood down as well.

Phil said, "Maybe now you will understand that we are serious! Like I said, I don't like you folks very much to begin with, but I am, or was; willing to do the right thing and help you learn how to grow or gather your own food."

Dan raised his hand and said, "I would like your help. Phil. . . Please?"

Soon, one by one they were raising their hands, but they did so reluctantly, with apprehension that there was a heaping portion of their freedom being forfeited in the process.

"Perfect," Phil said. "But I'm definitely not in the mood now." Phil and Jayden left the meeting and returned across Harris Road to their home.

Elijah told Aliyah and Henry, "I have a bad feeling about Phil, and I am seldom wrong." But he wondered, what choice did they have? Did he want to have Aliyah and his fate dependent upon Phil's group? But again, what other choice did they have? Today they barely got to this place with their lives, then they were in a no-win battle, their cars were shot up, and they had to pledge allegiance to someone who might be a sociopath.

Henry said, "Phil seems to know what he was doing. He doesn't want any crap, that's for sure."

Elijah said mockingly, "Well, since you put it that way. . .What the hell are you talking about?! He's a nutjob!"

Aliyah said, "Elijah, nutjob or not! I wish you would think three times before you pull out that damn gun again! You know you are not in Detroit and you are not the law! That goes for the both of you!"

"Whoa," Henry said, "I'm not sure who's worse, you or Phil."

Aliyah put on a scowl at that comment.

Noah Thomas approached Elijah. "Elijah, that took some nerve to stand up to those guys this afternoon. I know that you only want what is best for everyone and you are a good guy."

"Thanks, Noah," Elijah said. His head was not held high. "You know, Noah? Phil may be right that things are different now. We've got to find a way to work with him if we want to survive."

Noah said, "I suppose you're right. Man, I don't trust that guy, but maybe we should go get him."

Elijah said, "Well. . .I'd give him a day."

After reflecting a couple more days, and weighing their lack of diminishing options, and getting that much more hungry, consensus on the east side of Harris Road was that Noah should go over to talk to Phil. Noah, in turn thought that having Elijah's support in talking to Phil would be critical.

Evidently Phil had calmed down some as well. His demeanor toward Noah and Elijah was as if nothing had ever happened. So after an hour of small talk Phil and Jayden agreed to go to the forum to test the waters again.

Phil began, "We have thought this over for a long time and we think we know what will work best for everyone. We will pay \$10 in US 90% silver, old silver coins, payable at the end of the year for full time military service plus rations; Plus no tax for the household of any volunteers.

We will expect a lot out of those soldiers. We will expect each other household wanting to affiliate with us to pay a \$5 per year tax per year. In the first year starting next January. We will try to line up jobs for as many of you as possible. Those over the age of 75 or disabled will be exempt from the tax."

"Yea, but I don't have any money," a woman asked.

Everyone around her hushed her up. They didn't was a repeat of the confrontation that happened during the last meeting. They were two days hungrier than then.

Phil explained that Pre-1965 US coinage; Dollars, Half Dollars, Quarters and Dimes, because of their silver content, and bars of gold and silver bullion would be the currency in use. It was better that all other money was buried to avoid confusion.

Sometimes the now useless post-1964 coinage was useful by putting a handful into empty cans and tying the cans together with wire, then stringing them to the barbed wire. This was a low tech alarm that clanked distinctly if anyone disturbed the barbed wire.

You could easily tell a silver coin without even looking at it. If you drop a silver coin on the table it has a distinctive ring to it. Non silver US money has a clunky sound.

All nickels and very old pennies were a different, confusing story. The nickel metal and copper were worth much more than their face value in old coinage, but worth far less than their face value compared to silver money. So pennies and nickels were largely ignored because there was no immediate need for copper or nickel.

"When you hear the bell in the morning ring 3 times, report here. Have your weapons with you as often as possible.

Elijah thought the request for everyone to be armed was somewhat of a good sign. A tyrannical leader would never want that. At least Phil or Jayden wasn't going to shoot them on sight if they were armed.

"We need water!" a woman *begmanded* to Phil.

Everyone was waiting for a harsh rebuke, possibly violent.

"Jayden, please have someone bring this woman a bucket of drinking water." Phil did some grumbling so it was clear that he had a soft side somewhere in there. Phil was

probably a little mad at himself for caving into a request so soon after his hard line stand, especially given the manner the request was presented.

Jayden nodded to Phil and went for the water.

Noah whispered, "Look, the black guy is Phil's water boy."

"That is all," Phil concluded.

Chapter 5

The next day after the bell tolled thrice the entire community reported to the forum bearing their weapons.

Phil and Jayden were there with a new face.

"This is my brother Tim," Phil said. "He is very knowledgeable about growing and foraging for food. Tomorrow we will talk about some more things, but first we will bring you whatever news that we have."

Phil gave the day of the week and the date. "There is word coming to us that the Southland of the US is some kind of cauldron of violence and dying right now. We will give you as much news as we can. We have made a deal with the owner of that bean field right there." Phil pointed at a large soybean field behind them. "He has no way to harvest it. He will hire any of us to harvest it for him by hand. We get to keep half of what we pick. We will be able to do this for months, even when it is all dried up, because we can soak the beans and cook them for food or save them for food and seed for the next few years."

Tim added, "These commercial beans are good to eat, but tougher than the ones you buy. . .or bought. Anyway, you have to cook them. This will be a big food supply for everyone, but we will also have to prepare for the future by saving some for next year's seed."

The audience felt uplifted by the revelation. At least there was a plan to have some available food. Phil was not starting to look so problematic to many. Maybe he was the kind of person who knew what he was doing, but very cranky about it.

It occurred to Elijah that Phil and company really did not need to risk coming over to help other people, especially after the near gun battle the last time. which he was a key participant. Phil was some kind of different person, investing his time to work with the neighborhood, when he could have just hunkered down in his fortress house.

Phil nodded to Tim to continue.

"Another thing I want to do is explain how you can eat plants growing in your yard right now." Tim picked up a plant. "See this *weed*? This is called Lamb's Quarters. Farmers have been spraying chemicals on this for decades to get rid of it along with the rest of the weeds. It has been ignored." Tim looked at those among the gathering. "What's your name?"

"Sophia."

"Sophia, do you like raw spinach?"

She nodded in the affirmative.

"Here, pick a leaf off and try it," Tim said, offering her the plant.

"It's good. Better than spinach," she said.

"That's right," Tim said. "Look at these dandelions growing about. They are food. "

"I knew that," Noah joked about his yard.

Tim continued, "The second-most available weed around here is the common plantain. It is also safe to eat. It is nutritious and is also good for diarrhea, and topically for bee stings and burns. . . .Ummm there's some right there."

"I'm well prepared," Noah winked at the audience.

"Another so-called weed around here," Tim mentioned, "Is purslane. I'm not seeing any right here, but it is around, and is eaten in many parts of the world but has not been eaten here. You can also eat your hostas when they are young shoots. It's too late for them this year. You'll probably want to cook, or steam these greens, or they'll be bitter. Now don't go around eating everything unless you understand what you are eating. Some plants are toxic with just one bite. Some plants will do you in real quick like. After you eat up the goodies in your yards, if you are interested, we can go on some foraging expeditions and I can show you a lot more."

Phil spoke up, "Noah, I've got something here for you." He pulled a four inch long cylindrical object out of his pocket. "This is a flapper valve that you can put on your garden hose. This will enable you to get water out of your well without electricity. Your well is right over there." Phil pointed at a white four inch diameter PVC pipe sticking out of the ground about 15 inches and had a bush planted in front of it. "You put this on the end of your hose. You drop the end of the hose down your water well. You need a pretty long hose since the water may be about 50 feet down until the end is under water. You pull the hose up and let it down a few feet at a time. The end has to stay under water. You do this and it pumps the water up the hose. You keep doing it and water come all the way up out of the well."

"Whoa! Now that is cool!" Noah was happy at the thought of being able to get some clean water out of his well. He and Sophia shared a smile. "Thanks Phil, I can't wait to try it out."

Phil said, "Everyone here at the forum can share the hose. Just a couple of things; The hose gets pretty heavy because it is long and full of water, so not everyone can do it. The other thing is I'd use a couple sections of hose and keep a lot of it above ground, because if the hose falls into the well, that'd be a big problem."

Phil said, "Tomorrow we want to give a class on using your firearms." Then, using a more serious tone, Phil said, "Now I would like to know who among you is willing to commit to one year of military service. I described the terms yesterday."

It got a lot more quiet among the people. Henry stepped forward with his M-16 and 9mm sidearm.

Dan took one big step backwards with his shotgun.

Elijah told Henry, "You serious? I'm not doing any more fighting. I'm done. Now I will be a farmer."

Henry said, "I can't do boring stuff like that. What is the point of living if I have to pick beans all day?"

Elijah said, "I plan on spending my whole day watching Aliyah bend over out in the field."

Aliyah rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Be quiet."

Two teenage brothers, Brian and Bart Keller stepped forward. They each had a hunting rifle with scopes donated by their father. Mrs. Keller had a serious look of concern on their faces, but made no effort to intervene. They were both tall and athletic looking, perfect recruits. But Brian was known as the dysfunctional kid in the area, and it was always hoped that he would somehow grow out of it and not land in prison. Bart was not notorious enough in his own right to be a societal concern but was always profiled to be guilty by association to his troublesome older brother.

Then to the Keller matriarch's surprise, the Keller brothers' father, Brad also stepped forward. Bart smiled at his father. Brian shook his head. Brad looked like an older version of his sons. Even though he was an older man, still not a terrible recruit. Brad had one of the banger hand guns on his belt.

Martin Preston, a very young frail geeky kid stepped forward, which caused a bit of a hubbub among the crowd.

"Good job, men," Phil congratulated the men with a handshake. "Please report to Jayden across the road. Everyone else, if you hear the bell ring more than three times, get your weapons and make sure you are not shooting at any of our own people."

Every day there was a morning meeting in the same location. It followed the same format. The day's date was announced. Neighborhood related news. News about the US, when available. Then survival tips.

By consensus of those in the House, Jayden was made Captain of the Guard. Jayden had spent some time talking with Henry. So he recognized Henry as leadership material and made him a lieutenant. The entire Guard was merely a single platoon sized unit comprising of A and B squads.

The Guard rank and file did not have to do any physical training, but they spent most of their time going through the rigors of building heavy fortifications. Cutting wood and hauling it, and digging in hard clay was a lot more physical labor than any of the recruits had expected when they signed up.

There were no uniforms available for the Guardsmen. They were told to wear earth tone colors so they would not be overly conspicuous.

Captain Jayden Phipps and Lieutenant Miller agreed to make Brad Keller, the father of the Keller boys, Squad A Sergeant. Although inexperienced in military matters, Brad had a personality and temperament that seemed to suit him naturally for the job. Both of Brad's boys were intentionally left out of his squad A. Squad A consisted of geeky Martin, Jayden's wife Ella, and Donnie Schmidt, who was the son of a nearby farmer. Donnie and his father did not get along with because Donnie could not control his mouth. Donnie brought a 12 gage shotgun with him, but was told his attitude better stay behind. Donnie just thought he was misunderstood. It's not his fault his Dad didn't know how to admit he was wrong.

Ella Phipps had her own Landtec Customer Remington 700 Tactical bolt action rifle, which chambered a 7.62X51 cartridge. She also had a .45 sidearm and was reputed to be the best shot in the Community, at least during non-combat. Most of the Guard did not make the connection that Ella was Jayden's wife for awhile because she was white and she got no obvious preferential treatment from Jayden or endearing chit chat.

Martin Preston brought no weapon coming into the Guard, but Jayden loaned him an ancient, but still useful Mosin-Nagant bolt action rifle. A bolt action rifle is relatively slow since each round has to be manually chambered, but shoots a powerful 7.62X54R cartridge. It came with a bayonet which Martin kept on his belt. It is a heavy rifle, but Martin was not going to let anyone think he couldn't carry it. They spent only a few rounds of his very limited supply of ammunition training him. They found that by the third shot he was going to be fairly competent on the rifle.

Sergeant Keller's squad "A" built a main outpost at the north end of the community on the highest point of the generally flat surrounding terrain. This was done using logs chopped from the woods and dragged to the site. There were many hours of digging by hand. The panoramic view from the outpost encompassed the entire area, and Harris Road for two miles going both directions, except for through the woods to the west.

Logan "Angel" Howard was the squad leader for Squad B. Angel was a younger friend of Phil's with the do-rag who they had seen around on Phil's yard. He performed with valor from the spider hole during the Latin Mafia Invasion.

One time Elijah asked Jayden why they called Logan "Angel". Jayden said that Angel was a preacher and was so spiritually minded that he already had one foot in heaven. But he added that Angel's spirituality did not make him incapable of combat. Jayden was at Angel's side in the two-man spider hole and found during the recent battle "Angel would efficiently kill our enemies without any internal confusion. He completed each task without a hint of malice and without any emotion whatsoever."

The undermanned Squad B had the Keller brothers and Wesley Crawford, Tim Crawford's thirty-something son. Wesley had an AR-15 as was typical with the Crawford clan. Wesley was knowledgeable about his weapon, and could have been the squad leader, but was a bit too lazy for Jayden's liking.

Angel's squad B built fortifications at the edge of the woods. This would be a vital location as it was believed that any well planned attacks on the Community would come from that side, and probably at night.

The two outposts were to be manned at all times. It was a standing order that you don't leave for any reason until you are relieved. Rumors went through the Guard that if you fell asleep Phil would have you executed.

On a couple of occasions they caught Phil in a good mood, so they asked him about the threat of execution. He just told them, "If I were you, I'd stay awake. You want to get killed and have others die because you got sleepy?"

Lt. Miller's job was to run the day to day activities of the Guard. They were to build fortifications, man the outposts, and go on frequent patrols. Jayden's job was to visit the outlying areas, gathering intel and report to Phil.

Even though Elijah chose a different career path than Henry, he was interested in the activities of the Guard. Every night when Henry got "home" he would hear about the Guard's activities. Then they would continue the ongoing effort of Henry trying to recruit Elijah into the Guard.

The Williams home was their immobile van in Dan's driveway covered by an old above-ground swimming pool cover for privacy and insect control. Even though living in it was a subject of their own ridicule, it was nice to collapse there after a hard day of serfdom and a hasty bath out of an old galvanized bucket. Elijah kept telling Aliyah that the situation was only temporary.

The Community was motivated to get their daily work done. Since they got paid in hard money, people felt like their efforts was personally rewarding.

Noah and Sophia Thomas, would go to bed dead tired. Their day was like everyone else's day in the Community. Long hours of physical work. The work had some urgency to getting it all done, but the routine did not have the stress of the old modern world.

The boys were busy working too. They complained that they would rather play than do boring work, but there was nothing too physically demanding or harmful in what they did.

Daily chores lasted from shortly after the morning's bell all the way until sundown. If a thunderstorm came up they would do some work inside. They pumped and toted water. They chopped some wood and built a fire for cooking. Those who had fireplaces made good use of them.

They hauled gray water out of the sump in their basement and poured it into the toilet tanks. Thankfully, using a modern toilet was one convenience most did not have to give up. If they didn't use the gray water out of the sump, they could expect the basement to eventually become a foul smelling swimming pool that would ultimately destroy the foundation of the house.

Most of their day was out picking soybeans. The farm hands kept half of what they picked. The beans were apportioned by putting their bounty into two piles. Then the farmer chose one of the two piles to keep and the person harvesting got the other one. The beans were often used to make a soup or stew. Some of the families started growing their own garlic and onion beds. These were popular in flavoring their soup which was made all too frequently.

Everyone made a meal out of what they could. They foraged and bartered for the day's rations.

Excess harvested beans could be sold to the Guard for the soldiers' rations for some silver, or given to their chickens. People were almost all getting chickens. Eating an egg was a very satisfying contrast to a steady diet of tough soybeans and tough corn.

Sometimes squirrels or rabbits were hunted for food. The meat was stretched by putting it into the soup for some flavor. The biggest hunting reward was to bag an

elusive deer. These were probably becoming wiped out of the area by hunters.

There was a lake only a few miles away, but it was thought to be unsafe to travel there and even more unsafe travelling back. If a robber could see a nice fish was taken from the lake, it might invite a robbery. But a fish dinner was a rare delicacy that people would readily pay a dime or two for. The possibility of catching multiple large fish could be a lucrative proposition.

Chapter 6

Even though Mrs. Welch did not have her prescription refilled she was doing remarkably well. Aliyah and Tammy had turned a room in Mrs. Welch's home into a part-time medical clinic. Aliyah had become known as "Dr. Williams". She did not reject the title, because she figured it gave her patients a little more confidence in the improvised treatment they were getting.

Her nurse, or co-doctor, was Tammy White, a single lady who never married. Once Lt. Henry Miller found out that the much younger Tammy was single, he could not stop thinking about her. Tammy was fair skinned, freckle faced, and red headed. Tammy was a kind person, who was not talkative. Henry found himself craving her attention. Tammy had a curvy profile that Henry had indelibly imprinted on his mind.

Henry wasn't sure how to act around Tammy. What if she got creeped out by an older guy hound-dogging her? He did a personal inventory of all of his medical maladies to see if there was any reason for him to visit the clinic. Maybe he should just go on over there healthy. Yeesh! Contemplating a cold call to see her was more fearful than when he marched into the Latin Mafia headquarters. It didn't make sense.

When Henry saw Tammy going into the medical clinic, he decided to make his move. He would just have to wing it somehow.

"Ex-Excuse me," Henry stuttered. "Um. . .I was wondering if we could talk. . . or something." He realized his winging ability was fairly inept.

"Okay. What about?" Tammy looked concerned. "Do you want to see Dr. Williams?"

"Um, I want to ask you out, " Henry felt he had accomplished his goal and could try and catch his breath now.

"Out?" Tammy looked surprised."That's not very practical," Tammy said.

"Huh?"

"Well, it's just that there is no place to go out to."

Dejected and embarrassed, Henry wanted to drop his chin and started to turn away. "Yea, I-I guess you're right." He was thinking to himself how stupid and ridiculous he must seem.

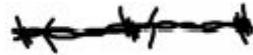
Tammy realized she was taken by surprise and felt she had given an unintended response. "What we *could* do. . ."

Henry perked up.

"Well, I was just going to say that you could escort me to church this Sunday."

"Church? Oh yea, church. I sure will. I'll come by your house and escort you to church," Henry said enthusiastically. He never thought of himself as a church person but he was definitely going to be attending church this week. "Where's the church?"

"Mrs. Welch's garage." Tammy pointed at a door that led directly to the church meeting place. There were only so many modern constructed places to be had. Most garages in this high demand area had one or two families living in them. New modern houses or any other buildings were not being built. Many houses were being destroyed during looting and many more were lost to fires due to improper heating methods. But the number of potential occupants also sharply declined after the collapse. Tammy didn't have a house of her own, but was fortunate enough to live in a room in a real house.



Elijah stood out in the field to straighten his back. The last thing he wanted was to get back cramps. Sometimes he worked on his knees. This kind of work was boring and a pain, but he would occasionally catch a glimpse of Henry and his troops chopping and digging to build fortifications. Now that was serious labor.

"Hi."

Elijah heard a small voice behind him. It was Liam Thomas, the younger of the two Thomas boys. "Hi," Elijah said.

"Where's your wife?"

"She's at the doctor's office."

"Is she sick?"

"No, she works there."

"Do you like to pick soybeans?"

"No. Do you?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you have many?"

Liam looked around. He watched a flock of birds fly by directly overhead. He said, "Where are those birds going?"

"I don't know."

"Do they know?"

"I'm sure they do."

"Do you think they have a boss bird?"

Elijah stopped at the question. "I suppose they do. Maybe the one in front."

"How do they talk?"

"I don't know, on account that I'm not a bird."

"Okay 'Lijah. See ya later."

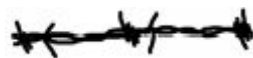
"See ya," Elijah said, thinking that it was nice to have an interruption in the tedious work. It had been a long time since he had a conversation like that. He use to have them all the time with his little daughter, Rene.

He remembered her in her little dresses and big glasses. Acting so proper while he acted so silly around her. He loved to tease her to see how she would react to his goofy ploys. It's no wonder women often turn out so bitchy, they way men love to tease them when they are little.

"Dad, that will be enough," Rene would say, maintaining her dignity. She was like a junior Aliyah.

That seemed like a lifetime ago. . . God, his baby was so damn little.

Elijah collapsed to the ground and cried, releasing tears and pent up emotion. What if Rene and her husband needed him right now? If there was ever a time for prayer, it was right now.



The pre-Industrial age setting without electricity was very quiet. The nights were very peaceful. Elijah and Aliyah were starting to nod off when they awoke to a man's voice screaming as if he were being tortured. What could be a possible reason for this? The sound was coming from across the road. What was Phil up to? The intensity of the screams would lead one to think whatever was causing them would soon kill him. But the horrifying screaming carried on all night, so many did not rest well.

At first light a gunshot was heard and mercifully the screaming stopped. This incident added to the enigma surrounding anything Crawford.

At the daily meeting, Jayden explained that they had heavily trapped the woods and an armed intruder fell in impaling himself on some sharpened stakes. "Since we were not sure if someone else was there, we did not want to put any of our Guards at risk by going into the trapped area. Then when we could check the situation out in the morning, we went ahead and did a "mercy killing" on the mortally wounded intruder. We just wanted to explain to you folks what was going on." Even though the circumstances were somewhat understandable, and some felt some gratitude for the protection, the whole thing was still appalling.

A couple of days later, the Guard at the north OP/LP Observation Post/Listening Post, heard gunfire off in the distance. It did not sound like practice. It sounded more like a firefight. It was believed to be coming from an area farmhouse only about a half mile away. It was bad tactics for the entire platoon to go out and check it out, so Jayden asked Henry to send out a small scouting party.

Henry decided to go himself. Henry chose Sgt. Keller and Ella Phipps of A Squad to go with him. They took a straight line approach through tall weeds, keeping as low as possible without sacrificing too much speed. They crawled past the signs the Guard had posted that read, "Attention: Sniper at Work".

"Sergeant Keller, you take point," Henry ordered.

"Lieutenant. You mean go in front?"

"Yea, go in front, and be careful. When you get close, keep it to a crawl."

"Okay," Sergeant Keller said, snapping a salute. The inexperienced Sergeant made his way through the two foot tall grass to the edge of the field where the farmhouse yard began. He saw that there were a couple of what he recognized as black and red dressed Latin Mafia gang members out in the back yard of the farmhouse cooking a skewered pig, turning it on a homemade spit. He was close enough to hear their voices but couldn't tell what they were saying. He figured the way they were acting it was probably something stupid anyhow.

Two hundred yards, Ella said, "I can take one."

"From *here*?" Henry asked.

"Umm, yea, no problem," she said.

"Tell you what; I would love for you to take another one out, but let's just wait here for Sarge to come back. We can plan a raid. Hopefully before they can eat the pork."

Eventually Brad looked back at them. The Lieutenant waved for him to return. They went back and reported their findings to the Captain.

Later in the evening, a meeting was called in the north OP/LP. Wesley was left in the west OP/LP at the woods by himself to forestall any attack from that direction. People left in the House were put on alert.

Capt. Jayden said, "Listen up. That LM house is in an open area. We want to take action against them while it is still dark. Here is how it will go down. Keller brothers, you come up to the house from the east. Try to get close enough to get good shots on LM members. Now listen, this is important, shoot twice, that way they will get a fix on the direction you are firing from. No more than twice. Immediately retreat back to the east for at least 500 yards. If they do not pursue, move slowly back toward the house. The rest of us will approach the house from the south. Henry, you will lead the main force to the farmhouse. Keep your eyes open. There could be a lot of them there. These sick puppies are a threat to our safety and we need to eliminate them."

Henry was not too sure of the outcome of this operation, but after all, he was instrumental in bringing the malevolent LM scourge to the Community and thus was compelled to participate. As long as he would get back alive for Sunday. . .

The force moved in proximity to the target area. Before the Keller brothers could break off from the rest of the team, Jayden surveyed the landscape with his binoculars, "Whoa! That huge pig and all that commotion! They definitely got reinforcements, but we don't know how many. Okay, Lieutenant, I'm open to suggestions."

Lt. Miller postulated, "Since they are in such close proximity to us, I suspect they are getting ready to stage an attack on us. We would be far better off letting them attack us while they had some type of atrocious unfair disadvantage. Again."

"I agree with your assessment, Lieutenant," Jayden said. "Who has the best night vision?"

Both of the blue-eyed Keller brothers, Brian and Bart raised their hands.

"Bart, go wide around the east of the house into that woodlot. If you go through the woods for about 5 minutes you will come out to a cemetery. That must be where they are parking their vehicles. Be careful and find out what you can. The information is important."

"Yes sir," said Bart.

"The rest of us have to go back. We'll be real busy tonight," Jayden sighed.

The platoon returned to the Community. The officers went to the inner sanctum of the Crawford House to meet with Phil about the situation.

"They won't come in here in a single column again," Phil said. "But beyond that, I don't think they are all that cagey."

So they might come across the field or something and stay off of the road," Henry reasoned. He wished that E was there to strategize with them.

"Or they might just come on foot," Jayden suggested.

Given their numbers, we better do something on our own terms."

"You mean, pre-emptive attack?" Jayden asked.

Phil paused amidst his calculations. "Yea, we'll attack, then brace for a big counter-attack. They are wise to the spider holes. You know it makes no sense. Why are they so zealously trying to fight us?" Then he asked Henry, "How did they know you were here?"

"Only they know the answers to those questions," Henry said in disgust.

Sergeant Keller came to the door with his son Private Bart Keller.

Jayden immediately told Bart, "Come in, please."

Bart had heard that those in the House were sitting in the "lap of luxury", but clearly they were not. Bart was all sweaty and had leaves and filth from the woods all over him.

"Give us a full report, Bart," Jayden requested.

"You were right," he said to Jayden. "I saw, like, 30 or 40 cars in the cemetery parking lot." There was a couple of guards there and like, I don't know, 100 or 200 guys around a bonfire talking all Mexican or something. I don't know what they were saying but the one guy was really pissed off."

"Red and black, right?" Henry asked to confirm they were Latin Mafia.

"Huh?"

"Their clothes. They were all red and black, right?"

"Um. Yea."

"Public education," Phil lamented. "There's your intel boys, let's go on over there and hit 'em while, and where, they least expect it. Take the Guardsmen and go door to door to conscript every able bodied fighter to join in. I'll go get her highness the Queen

and her trusty .22 rifle. Everyone goes, who can. This will be a night to long remember."

Henry walked over by the Williams van and found him there. "Congratulations E, you will be in the Guard tonight.

"I don't think so," Elijah replied.

"Everyone who can is going. We know where the LM is and we are going to put a hurt on them."

"Sonofabitch!" Elijah said. "Why is it that I always get involved in this?! I told you I would end up regretting it! I wish you would listen to me once in awhile! No. . . how about just once! If it's one thing I hate, it's to be ignored!"

"Regret what?" Aliyah asked.

"Oh. . .I'll explain it later," Elijah said.

Henry had a guilty look on his face. He told her, "He's just a little charged up over having to go out on an operation."

Elijah said, "Charged up huh? You know you can. . ."

Aliyah interrupted Elijah, "Come on Babe, we all have to go."

"Oh no! You are not going! He's the soldier! I'm the peon farm hand! You are the doctor!"

Aliyah said, "That's right. I am their doctor. They will probably need one. Now let's go do this."

"Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" Elijah started getting his battle gear around. "We're not even supposed to be here! Damn it all!"



A force of about 40 fighters were gathered at the north OP/LP. Some were assigned to the preexisting squads and a Squad C was formed from all of the least able-bodied conscripts.

It was quite dark. Captain Phipps was tough to see but easy to hear. "Listen up everyone. We have an enemy right over there," he pointed at the woodlot. "There are a lot of them and we are certain they will come here. That is a situation we don't want to deal with. But this opportunity may be time sensitive, so Squads A and B are going to sneak up on them and shoot everyone who moves and all of their cars until we can't shoot any more. If they do get their wits about them, then A and B will all pull back

here double time. The password is 'bubble'. Squad C led by Lieutenant Miller will be held in reserve next to this outpost and that cluster of burned out cars on the side of the road. The enemy will have to run up this grade to get to us which will make them slower targets. A and B, quietly advance to the woods, on me. Squad C, start digging in as much as possible while we are gone. Do not use the outpost, that is for returning A and B Squad. Don't shoot our own people. Questions?"

Dan asked, "How will we be able to see them?"

"They won't be able to see us any better than we see them. A and B, Let's go, now."

Dan was shaking his head.

Elijah had to admit, Jayden seemed to know what he was doing. At least he had a credible plan.

"I want you next to me," Jayden told Elijah.

Elijah didn't know whether to hate Jayden or not.

While A and B Squads went on the assault, C Squad got busy doing what they could to find or make cover. Lt. Miller had them rearranging the burned out cars into a line. Some of the draftees grabbed their hand tools from home and were digging furiously in various locations, all arranged into an arc.

Squad C were all startled, turning when they heard a car coming from the south, opposite of the known threat. They were relieved when they saw it was Dan, bringing up his own perfectly good car.

"What's he thinking? Dan may want to use his car later," Henry asked some of the others, but then got busy again.

"There may not be a later," a woman's voice from the dark said.

No one on the assault force liked going through the woods in the dark. It was very dark, but the raucous made by the partying bangers was audible. Once they reached the edge of the woodlot, Some light from their bonfire penetrated into the edge of the woods. Jayden motioned for the team to fan out. There were enough large tree trunks to provide cover for the attackers. Many of the bangers were now visible in the light of the bonfire.

Jayden tapped Ella. He used his hand to make a long beard gesture on his chin, then he pointed out Chiva, who he remembered filled some kind of a leadership role for the gang when they attacked. Chiva was about 100 yards away, near the bonfire. Jayden wanted to take the opportunity to make one of their leaders a casualty.

Ella nodded. It was an uncomplicated shot. Some bullet drop, not much wind, a little bullet spin compensation, he's not moving much and control breathing and. . .

. . .zzzzpooof! crack! The bullet nearly went in one ear and out the other. The gunshot was not heard by the Latin Mafia until a split second after the damage was done. Chiva dropped like a wet rag.

Everyone else started firing at targets they had picked out. Bangers were scrambling around looking for cover behind some of the bulky newer tombstones. As per the plan, the attacking force was also putting plenty of lead into their vehicles.

Jayden wondered if the number of casualties they were inflicting was enough to warrant the action. There were so many cars, and so many targets running about. He thought about advancing but was concerned about his side's inexperience, the darkness, and friendly fire. He also knew they were facing a force much larger than theirs and things could easily change.

Noah Thomas was pleased with himself that he was getting used to firing the sawed off 12-gage shotgun he inherited after the last battle. He couldn't say for sure he was doing any damage though. After a few blasts he made an effort to more accurately hit a target.

Sporadic gunfire started returning in their direction. Then they heard a medium machine gun firing back. Large lead projectiles penetrating deeply into the surrounding trees. Private Donnie Schmidt got a big chunk of wood into his eye. He was holding his face and stumbling around looking for help. Then Private Martin Preston and Noah Thomas saw Donnie get directly hit with more rounds and go down screaming.

"Bubble!" Jayden shouted. He could hear others in the assault team saying the password down the line.

Friendly fire ceased. Upon hearing the bubble codeword, the wildly excited team ran like scared jackrabbits toward home.

Jayden and Elijah stayed in their forward position as long as possible to suppress the LM from rallying for a counterattack. Martin had to make a choice, to stay with Donnie, who was probably dying, in which case he would be almost certainly killed himself, or leave him. Donnie was very heavy and Martin a much smaller person.

"Help me! Help! I'm hit!" Donnie screamed as he writhed in pain.

Martin reasoned he had no choice but to leave Donnie and he would be forever tormented by his decision. Reluctantly, he left the scene.

Jayden and Elijah made their way over to Donnie. From the what they could see of one of his gaping wounds, Donnie had zero chance of making it, so it was no time for heroics. They made the same choice as Martin, but Jayden grabbed Donnie's rifle which he could no longer use. The rifle was too valuable to leave to the enemy.

Elijah thought he was done adding horrible memories to his dreadful mental gallery of revulsion that spanned two military tours in Iraq, a lengthy police career, now this. Lamentably, it seemed his involvement in violent situations would never end.

One of the hood chiefs went into the farmhouse and told Mo, who was looking out of the window, "Generalissimo. Chiva is dead. We lost a lot of men. Shall we attack?"

"Yes! Right now! Everyone! Don't be stupid like Chiva and just drive up there like the last time though." Mo had heard Chiva's excuses how he lost so many men just going into a small residential area.

"Si, Generalissimo. Shall we take the heavy stuff?"

"No. Not too close as long as they got our bazooka."



Squad C was in position on at the North Outpost. Squad C couldn't see much of anything. They started hearing lots of footsteps and lots of "Bubbles" from returning Squad A and B members, preventing accidental friendly fire. The returnees filled the outpost and more took positions nearby. But there was no immediate LM counterattack. Squad C wanted to know what had happened but A and B members were so out of breath they couldn't say very much.

Jayden and Elijah were the last "bubbles".

Jayden was prone next to Elijah facing the LM. Then it got very quiet. This situation was a cause for concern. Each minute seemed like ten. The LM must certainly counterattack. They certainly won't sit around and wait for the Guard to hit them repeatedly. If there was a counterattack, whoever was leading it was a little more knowledgeable than the goaty looking hombre who lead the LM into their last skirmish. Maybe he shouldn't have had Ella dispatch the inept leader so soon. What if they decided to attack the Community from the other side? All of their defenseless children could face a horrifying slaughter.

Dan was standing next to his late model car with his shotgun. From his vantage point on the road he spotted two silhouettes in the moonlight crawling on the ground up

the hill. His car was facing up the hill as he intended. He popped on his car's headlights. The illumination revealed a couple dozen bangers crawling up the slope toward the outpost.

A frenzy of gunfire was unleashed upon the vulnerable bangers, who tried to return fire, but they could not recognize any targets in the dark up the slope, so they did the only thing they could do was to turn right and shower Dan and his car with automatic gunfire. But one of the headlights stayed on for what seemed like a ridiculous amount of time. The pinned down bangers shot at the headlight and the Guard and Community had target practice at the illuminated bangers.

Then more bangers started providing cover fire from a position behind the attackers. None of the crawling bangers survived. The LM ceased fire, including the heavy machine gun.

Jayden reasoned that the Latin Mafia would not try to sneak back again, for fear of another set of headlights beaming on them.

Pvt. Wesley Crawford had a terrible hand injury that amputated one of his fingers. Dr. Williams was doing her best to keep the casualty from being a bigger problem later.

Nurse-Doctor Tammy made her way down to Dan. Sgt. Keller was at Dan's side. Dan was clearly dying. He had a mortal wound in the chest and several other wounds, including a ghastly one on his neck.

"You were a real hero tonight, buddy," Keller praised Dan. "That move you made was a real game changer. Can I do anything for you. . .cigarette?"

"I don't. . . smoke," Dan said, then showing signs of severe distress. A few very labored shallow breaths later and he gave up the ghost.

Elijah wondered to himself if Dan had any idea this morning that he would be dead before the next morning. No one can guarantee they will be around another day. A very sobering thought.

The Guard garrisoned the outpost and dismissed the rest of the Community back to their homes. Some of the Guardsmen were sent to the basement of Crawford's house to try and get some rest. But no further action took place that night. Once again the Community was relieved to have survived a serious threat with relatively low casualties.

At first light there were plenty of weapons to be had. Newly issued AK-47s, and other oddball pieces were for the taking along with extra ammunition. Also many of the

enemy had pistols and knives, which were taken. A couple of the fighters even found hand grenades, which Jayden took immediate possession of.

The next day Jayden sent Sgt. Keller and Martin Preston back to the woods to recover Donnie Schmidt's body and scout out the Latin Mafia. Donnie's body was still at the spot where he died. They managed to return the body, dragging it on a tarp and reported that the LM had completely pulled out of the farm.

Chapter 7

Phil Crawford found himself becoming more engulfed in performing the functions of government. Sewage was pervasive and becoming a serious health concern. Phil dictated that the Guard would construct several outhouses to accommodate those living in the shanties.

Jayden argued that the Guard should not be used for all public works, to which Phil rebutted, that they didn't have the money to pay for contractors to do the demanding job of digging outhouse pits. Phil listened though, and amended the plan to use a blend of Guard labor and told Jayden to request that those who would use the facilities help pitch in.

Phil also had to hold court outside in his driveway. There were no body of laws to rule on. Phil made it up as he went along. Captain Jayden Phipps also served as Bailiff Phipps. There were no lawyers. Several other citizens were in attendance, some with some involvement to a particular case and others in the gallery were just very nosey.

The Guard brought to his court two parties who were arguing over who should live in Dan's abandoned house. The arguing caused neighbors to fear that fighting would erupt over the issue. Even though there was not much fighting initiated in the well-armed community.

"I was in the house first," Kevin argued.

"Yea but I'm Dan's cousin," Todd said. "Blood is thicker than water. It's in the Bible and the Constitution."

Kevin argued, "Any other time, whoever is there first gets 'squatter's rights', everyone knows that! Well, except this moron! Now you want me to. . ."

"Okay, hold it!" Judge Phil commanded. "You guys shut up and listen. We aren't going to be able to use squatters rights in this town."

Todd looked at Kevin and smiled.

Phil explained, "So, a hero to the town dies and then there's a mad dash to take his stuff? That won't work. And you Todd. Cousin? Really? That is not much of a claim on inheritance. Only a spouse or child will inherit." Phil thought about his own successors to the "throne" and the need to avoid any conflict brought about because he did not declare his succession.

Todd looked disappointed.

"I am not Solomon. I can't solve every moral dilemma for everyone. No one can do that fairly. But I am a capitalist because I know it works. The greed of man is a constant that we can always count on. The one who is willing to commit the most for the house is the one who will live there. . . Bailiff Phipps."

"Yes, Judge."

"Whenever a house becomes vacant, the house and everything in it will be put up for public auction by the Guard. The money from the sales will be used for public works. If anyone tries to scavenge it before the auction they will be shot as a looter."

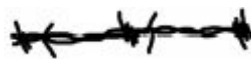
"We'll do it. Good idea, your honor," Jayden was pleased.

Phil continued, "Another thing; I want everyone here to bear witness to this; If anything happens to me, Jayden Phipps will be my successor as the ruler. Queen Amy will continue to live in the house and run it. If you outlive her, the house is yours and Ella's, unless any of our children come here."

The audience clapped in approval.

"Thank you Phil." Jayden nodded to the audience, thanking them for the applause. "This means a lot." Jayden was touched by the honor of being next in line to being the leader.

Phil said, "You're the clear choice. Like I said, I'm no Solomon, but I can reckon at least that much."



Church was held in Mrs. Welch's garage. Although she did not get her medicine, she yet lived, and seemingly very well.

People brought their folding chairs and plastic chairs with them and lined them up in the garage. No one bothered to try and dress up. It was a small percentage of the town who wanted to go to Sgt. Angel's church service but more started to feel like their spirits were being ministered to and appreciated it.

The entire Crawford household was in attendance, but they didn't take any chances with security. The Guard was still on duty at all times, rotating shifts day and night, which included during special events. Angel sat on a folding chair in front facing the congregation.

Tammy and Henry were in attendance. They gave each other a smile and Tammy took Henry's hand.

Angel led the congregation in singing the first verse of "Amazing Grace" which was the only verse of the only church hymn that they knew. They all wished that at least one of them had owned a hymnal.

*Amazing grace,
How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch, like me,
I once was lost,
But now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

After the brief song Angel called upon Tim Crawford. Tim was Phil's younger brother, the organic guy, "Tim, will you lead us in prayer?" and everyone bowed their heads and closed their eyes.

Tim prayed, "Heavenly father in Heaven thank you for our friends Donnie and Dan who gave so much to help us. We ask that you will comfort their families and give us wisdom in our dealings with this difficult world and we ask that you will bring peace and prosperity to our land. We pray in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ."

Then Angel arose to deliver the Sunday message. "First of all, I want to say welcome to the new faces here. Seeing you here is a blessing to us. Also, I want to say that I am very grateful. Like most of you, I have very good health. I live in a Community that has enough food. We have water. God has seen fit that we have won our battles. Not everyone can say this much. God gets the credit for bringing us through all this."

Phil, Jayden, Tim and others said in unison, "Amen."

"Another thing I want to mention, is that I know God is real," Angel said. "Now that everyone is away from their TVs and grocery stores, and have to work with nature up close to raise our own food, perhaps we all can see that we only eat by God's grace. Maybe we realize now that only God can create a functional and beautiful nature. If it were left up to evolution or chance, nature would never be able to function well enough to even begin, no matter how much time you gave it. I could give you an endless supply of examples of this, but if your mind is closed it wouldn't matter."

Angel continued, "As I mentioned we are blessed with so much. We only need one more thing. We need to build up ourselves spiritually. There is a battle going on that

we cannot see. The forces of Heaven and his Angels are at war with the forces of Satan and his fallen Angels, the Demons."

"As I said, we cannot see the spiritual conflict with our eyes, but what we call the spiritual realm is not a misty illusion or some kind of dream. It is more real than this world we walk around in. In the spiritual world you will have a real body and will be free to move and see things for what they are."

"So, what is all the fighting about in the spiritual realm? You may ask. Satan was created by God. Satan wanted to become God himself, but he knows he can't win. Don't just rely on me to tell you all this. Go read it in your Bible."

"Here's the thing. God is perfect and lives in a perfect place. Only perfection can be in His Heaven. None of us are perfect so without God's Plan we can only go away from Him to the place of outer darkness and pain. However, God has made a plan for every human being. We see in our Bibles in the Book of Romans in Chapter 6 Verse 23 'For the wages of sin is death but the Gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.' Notice, that it says 'gift'. Most people think those who behave correctly will get into heaven. But no one is that good that they can get in on their own. Romans 5:8 declares, 'But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'"

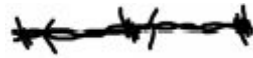
It's an *uber*-simple plan available to all. God wants you to accept his plan but Satan wants to hurt God by getting you to not accept the plan, and will use all manners of confusion and lies to make sure you don't accept God's plan."

"Here's the plan, so everyone please listen closely. Since God is perfect he had a Son who was both Human and God. I'm talking about Jesus. Jesus was sinless and willingly died for all of your sins, paying the price for your sins. In order for you to receive payment for your sins, all you have to do is to accept that payment through prayer."

"If you really have prayed to receive Jesus' gift, you will want to turn from your sin and want to serve your beautiful Savior, Jesus. Please, everyone, if you have not considered this, seek a Christian out and make this happen. If you need any private personal help with this, please look me up." Then Angel concluded the short service in prayer.

Henry had never heard of any such salvation plan before. He had been in church, but it seemed like all he was supposed to do was follow a set of rules, not accept a Savior. Which was right? It does make sense that Satan does not want the truth to be known. Henry decided he must get a Bible and find out for his own. He did not want to be fooled by the wrong thing. What if his soul really was at stake in this matter? This

was not something to be taken lightly, or considered hastily, but it must get his full attention, and soon."



The auction commenced right after the forum was held on Monday morning. Kevin and Todd were there along with a big crowd wanting to see who would be the next owner of Dan's bachelor pad.

Elijah told his Doctor wife, "It would sure be nice to get out of that van and swap it for a house. I only got about 75 cents."

Henry Miller was standing next to them not saying much.

Jayden opened the bid, "Okay, who has five dollars for this house?"

Kevin raised his hand.

"Okay, how about seven dollars," Jayden said.

"Seven," Todd Said.

Jayden said, "How about ten dollars; anyone want to go 10?"

"Ten." Kevin sounded determined.

Jayden asked for twelve.

Everyone looked at Todd who stood frozen.

"Twelve Dollars," Henry Miller said.

"Twenty," Kevin said.

"Twenty One," Henry said.

Kevin turned to Todd his arch nemesis and said, "C'mon bro, give me your seven dollars."

Todd gave Kevin the money.

"Twenty seven and. . . thirty cents," Kevin said, obviously on his last bid.

"Twenty seven forty," Henry said

Elijah looked at Aliyah and whispered, "Maybe I should have joined the Guard if they are going to pay him that kind of money."

"Any more bids? Going going gone to Henry Miller," Jayden said rather quickly, showing his satisfaction that Henry got a house.

Aliyah congratulated Henry. "I'm so happy for you."

"You guys are moving in too," Henry said.

Aliyah squealed with joy and hugged Henry. "Window screens! I can't wait!"

Elijah said, "Awww! No way! Thanks, man!" He also hugged Henry. "I'll pay rent."

Henry said, "You can't pay rent. The house is half yours."

Elijah scrubbed Henry's bald head in excitement, "Thank you so much! Awww! That is so cool!"

Henry said, "Let's move in."

They immediately started hauling things into their newly purchased house. No huge stack of papers to sign, just move in.

Jayden stopped Henry, holding his hand out to receive Henry's money.

"Oops. Guess I better take care of the details." He put the stack of silver dollars and the four dimes in Jayden's hands.

Jayden looked at the town's money and asked, "Anyone needing an outhouse construction job?"

Kevin and Todd raised their hands.

Chapter 8

October

As time passed most Americans had died; They were murdered or died of causes that would have been easily treated in the not too distant past. Among those remaining, many struggled to function while in a state of deep depression. Suicide was a common occurrence. There was little interruption from the current physical and mental anguish. People missed their TVs and entertainment which occupied such a big part of their prior lives, almost to the point of being a life support system. They missed many other of their necessities; coffee, cigarettes, junk food, and countless other amenities, although their bodies functioned fine without any of it.

But word got out into the surrounding areas that the House of Crawford had at least a stable economic system and protection from marauders. The system was a blend of capitalism and feudalism. The Community offered economic freedom. There was no other such system known in the area. Those who came to Crawford usually stayed.

The town was not without its growing pains. The overcrowding was another stressor. Not many were able to have a garden in their back yard anymore because of all of the third world type shanties that leaned on and surrounded the modern constructed houses. Some of the crude shacks were unexpectedly cozy on most days, especially if a large sheet of plastic could be found for the floor. But the shanties were typically miserable in a thunderstorm, especially after it got cold out. Residents also made their homes in vehicles, outbuildings, garages, and sometimes were just sardined into existing houses, some for free, others paying rent as the owner saw fit.

It was getting more difficult to keep everything under control. The governing law was "behave so you don't get either banished or hung."

Also there were some unexplained disappearances of people. In some cases it made no sense that a person would leave and never return, especially without taking certain items they owned.

From what was known, the town of Delburg operated differently. Some of the farms that were close to Delburg were forced through coercion to supply a large share of their production to the town. They were in a sense made slaves to Delburg. Farmers, being

the independent lot that they are, were vocal about their hatred of Delburg to any who came by.

But not much else was known about what was going on in the nearby town because of the "Delburg Curtain". The roadblocks at the entry points to Delburg and threats of death were tight enough to keep those from the House of Crawford from trying to get in even if they wanted to. It was thought the situation in Delburg certainly must be worse, so no one missed going there. Some however, hoped to gain knowledge of the whereabouts of certain family members and friends.

The big obstacle known as Delburg also made travel to the west far more difficult. Since Delburg was a forbidden area, it was a long way around it to go straight west. The Indiana State line was just five or so miles past Delburg.

There was no income tax or sales tax in the Community. Several more nearby farms and rural houses were more than happy to unite with "King Phillip" and the security his realm presented. The area and population of the Community kept growing exponentially. As new arrivals became more competent at their new jobs, which were mostly farm labor, they would in turn help train more new arrivals. There was plenty of farms that wanted their crops manually harvested. Workers were offered all sorts of daily incentives to come work. Their compensation typically involved an exceptional lunch.

As the area expanded, more people joined the Guard and the economy was becoming larger and more diverse. Thus more stable and efficient.

One family opened a pawn shop. Their shop also rented out hand tools they had purchased from scavengers.

Some brave individuals became scavengers. It was a risky business. They would look for useful items, take them, and find buyers. The most foolhardy scavengers would go into the cities, trading food in exchange for the more valuable items from the most shady of characters, or just go through abandoned homes. These items were good for the productivity of the people, so the items could demand a very high price. Coveted items included gardening tools, cast iron cookware, and even things such as bee hives.

There were also new service businesses. Diggers and wood cutters would do jobs for barter or pay in silver.

Cutting wood was not without its danger. There is no guarantee that a tree will fall a certain direction no matter how meticulous the cutting is. Being a wood cutter required stamina and constant focus. Because of its rigors, the market compensated their efforts with good pay.

The Burket family just south of town had a food store that had the commonly found dried beans and dried field corn. But also eggs, milk, meat, fruit, nuts, and sold a remarkable variety of pre-collapse canned food. This time of year they also had a nice assortment of produce; grapes, winter squash, tomatoes, melons, okra, cucumbers and many other items. If a customer wanted any of these, they were relatively expensive, but nevertheless priced low enough to sell before they became overly ripe.

At times Burket's store would sell something really backwoods, such as pork placentas. Mrs. Burket argued that selling items like piglet afterbirth drove more customers out of the store than it did to enhance the store's bottom line.

Since almost everyone carried a weapon, in spite of the mental stress of daily survival, it was a relatively polite society. Physical and social boundaries were not often breached. Anyone with any sense at all knew not to start something up with someone else for no reason. If you were in a grumpy mood, you just kept to yourself.

Phil Crawford believed that it was important to make education available to the Community for its long term success. The first step was to organize a school library out of the front room in Mrs. Welch's house, who volunteered to be the librarian. Phil donated most of his library and bookshelves to the project. His house was getting overly crowded anyway. Phil's books were largely about gardening, but also other non-fiction subjects such as Bible studies, guns, and history. The library was promoted at the forum and some of the others in the neighborhood donated some books as well.

The fiction collection soon was discovered as a source of entertainment for the few hours a day when people were not working. This promised to be a nice activity for the less busy winter months though.

Angel often promoted Bible reading. His main contention was that people were always looking to read stories about fantastic things such as fantasy or sci-fi, but would ignore the most fascinating accounts that were actually true. He liked to say that the Bible is far more than "Thou shalls" or "begats".

Soon after the library was established, the Community naturally progressed to starting a public school, open free to all of the children. At this point there were about 35 who would attend in midday to give them a break from the work. This schedule would get the students out of work in the hottest hours during summer days.

Amy Crawford, also known as the Queen, volunteered to be the school's first teacher. She had experience homeschooling their son and daughter who now both lived a couple of States away. At least she hoped they were still alive. Their well being was not in her control so their welfare was something that she did not allow herself to dwell on.

People called the Community "Crawford Community", or "House of Crawford", but then it just became "Crawford". Phil was flattered by it, but thought someone like his favorite modern US President, Ronald Reagan should be its namesake. Phil explained that there was already a Crawford, in Crawford County Ohio.

One recently arriving settler posted a sign on the edge of town reading, "Welcome to Sphincterburg. The Center of the World." A particularly sharp tongued-woman suggested the name be, "Somebodyjustshootmenowtown," but it was a little too long.

So they got the idea to call their tiny sanctuary in an extremely troubled world, *Crawfordton*. Crawfordton was a town, albeit a slummy looking location with all of the makeshift dwellings, burned out cars, people living in car/shanty hybrids, shot up conventional houses and fortifications scattered about. Clothes were always hanging about being solar dried. Even if they were not washed with water, they would not be smelly due to the moisture deprivation to the stink causing bacteria. All that remained on the clothes afterward was some dried up dirt and inert body salts.

Next to the forum where the meetings were held was "the heap". The heap was a public access non-organic resource pool, or junk pile. No one threw anything away that someone else could possibly use, or cut up to fabricate something useful.

Although Crawfordton was not a scenic locale, it was a welcome sanctuary to transient souls who were wandering aimlessly looking for provisions. Many of the remaining people across America had nothing and were just nomadic, expending large amounts of energy to look for their next meal. Being a vagabond was not a promising lifestyle.

When the collapse came, most of the cities started to self destruct. The cities burned and murder was omnipresent, with millions leaving the cities like rats on a burning ship and fanning out into the unwelcoming countryside. The number of these urban dwelling refugees, was now on the decline as they often just perished during their journey along the road to nowhere.

A couple of young Mexican men wandered into Crawfordton. They were immediately assumed to be Latin Mafia spies and nearly executed by mob rule. Seeing that the men much more aptly fit the description of a drifter, Guardsman Martin Preston intervened. After being brought to Jayden, the Mexicans were found to not be spies and were offered an apology by Jayden and their embarrassed accusers. People during these times still went out of their way not to be thought of as racists. Jayden did not berate anyone over their vigilant profiling, but brought attention to their quick jump to a wrong conclusion.

A particularly pathetic looking skeleton of a man wandered into Crawfordton. He was a black man who was so pale as to almost pass as a white man. His only possessions were the layers of clothes he was wearing and a plastic milk jug repurposed into a water canteen.

Elijah still had not forgotten about going to Cincinnati to be with his daughter. So he questioned many of those who he thought could possibly have been from, or knew of, the Queen City. He took the opportunity to approach the drifter. "Brother, where are you from?" Elijah handed the man a big ripe golden apple with russet spots on it.

"Dayton," the pale black skeleton of a man said, clearing his throat. He took a big munch on the apple, then took a drink of his water that had suspicious sediment drifting around in it.

Elijah winced at the sight of the water. "Any word about Cincinnati?" Elijah asked. Cincinnati was farther south from Crawfordton than Dayton. Both Dayton and Cincinnati are large cities in Ohio.

"Nah," he spoke slowly with a deep fatigue and mental depression, holding the apple up toward Elijah expressing his thanks while munching. "Lemme tell ya 'bout Dayton." They both sat down under a shagbark hickory tree. "People down there would eat the bark off of this here tree. They would eat this here grass. They eat road kill, and rats. They eat each other. They eat their own children or swap their children with somebody else to eat. They sell human meat for water."

Elijah thought he might urp over the thought of the appalling topic.

The boney man looked down and put his hands on top of his head while still holding the apple. He said, "I ain't gonna lie to you. . ." He was fighting back tears. "I thought about doing it, eatin' the dead. . . but I didn't. I didn't." He started tapping his foot nervously. "I'd rather be dead. I ain' no zombie you know. I caught a damn buzzard. It ain't no black chicken. I ate some glue. I ate some weeds. It was nasty, but I'm here."

"What's your name, brother?"

"Trevor. Trevor C. Banks. I don't know how Cincinnati is, Chicago is, Columbus is, man I used to love Dayton, but I ain't gonna lie to you, Dayton is some kinda hell on this earth up in there." Trevor looked up and went back to eating his apple. He shook his head at how awful good the apple was and held it up toward Elijah again in appreciation.

Elijah's heart sank. What kind of horror was his daughter experiencing in Cincinnati? Should he even dare to hope that she is still alive. What would have happened if they stayed in Detroit? Is it worth living in this world anymore? Elijah felt

the tug to go to Cincinnati at regular intervals. He couldn't ask Aliyah to walk down there with him in this environment.

At harvest time, Phil was pleased with the many winter squash he had planted all over his yard in the spring time. Certain hills that were planted in the shade did not produce, but the rest of them did well as long as they had mostly direct sun throughout the day. Winter squash does not grow or get harvested in the winter, but is named so because it will store over the winter. Phil found that the best producer was the Waltham Butternut variety. A large number of big seeds are removed from each large squash. Phil would have seeds for some of those who wanted to plant some the following year. The nutritious winter squash are cooked by roasting them in a pan in the oven. He liked to put his home made maple syrup on it.

Phil had a sugar maple tree on his property. He collected about two gallons of sap a day from it with stainless steel taps, plastic tubes and plastic jugs during February and March, when the temperature is freezing at night, and 40 degrees Fahrenheit or higher during the day. The sap has a shelf life of about a week. Once 97% of the water is boiled down, when it reaches 219 degrees, the sap becomes real maple syrup. Partway during the boiling off process, he runs it through a coffee filter. If it is all the way boiled, it will not go through the filter. The syrup has an indefinite shelf life. It was no problem to make it in February for use nine months later the following November.

There were still vast areas of soybeans and field corn to harvest, and farmers looking for workers to sharecrop with. Now the crops were dried on the plants, and could be stored, so the work went into overdrive. Workers were working long hours to collect as much as possible before the seeds fell off of the plants.

Young Hunter Thomas was such a good worker that an area farmer wanted to hire him on as a full time hand. Sophia and Noah had a long talk with the farmer. They asked around about the farmer and found no one had anything bad to say about him. It sounded like a great vocational opportunity for Hunter, although he would not be near the school. Noah and Sophia figured that Hunter could do better than just farming with all his enthusiasm. Liam, Hunter's other brother wanted to go too, but was sorely disappointed when his role model was not allowed to go.

It was nice and cool out this time of year. The sunshine provided a radiant warmth. The bugs were not bugging. Out in the fields it was quiet, with only the sound of a breeze passing through the fields of bone-dry crops.

"Listen," Elijah said.

". . .To what?" said Aliyah.

"Nothing. No sirens, no traffic. Nothing."

"I thought you said it was boring?"

"Yea. There's no denying that. Sometimes, boring is good. It lets you think."

"What are you looking at?" Aliyah asked. Elijah was staring at her.

"You know you're beautiful," Elijah said to his wife out in the bean field.

"Oh, you're just a crazy boy," Aliyah said, trying to tame her messed up hair.

They kept pulling up bean plants and shelling the soybeans into a bucket.

Elijah kept staring at Aliyah. "You know, those beans way over there need picked."

"Over there? Why those beans are just the same. . ." Aliyah connected the dots.

"Now what would people in this upstanding Community say about their Doctor after that kind of behavior?"

"I don't know, but they would say her husband was a real lucky guy.

She shook her head.

"I'm talking very very lucky."

"I *know* how lucky you are talking here, alpha male. That can't happen. Let's postpone the call of the wild, okay? You know we live in a house now."

"Okay okay. I ain't gonna forget you know."

"Oh I know it."

Chapter 9

Ottawa, Indiana

Among the scoundrels who seized the massive multi-warehouse Goldfinch Foods Distribution Center, Kent DeGraff was not the smartest; not the most creative; not the bravest; and probably was the least charismatic. But Kent was assuredly the most ruthless.

Very soon after it became apparent that the collapse of the dollar was not just going to be a bad hiccup in the US economy, Kent and his pals, Bill and Dencil saw the misfortune of others as the opportunity of a lifetime. Kent was on the bottom of the page on the organizational chart at Goldfinch. He was a forklift driver for Goldfinch, driving around all day loading and unloading trucks.

So now Kent knew that all they had to do to breach the almost non-existent security was to go to the front gate, and walk into the guard station to shoot the unarmed guard, then go into the office and shoot whoever else happened to be there. The three men knew there was now minimal or no law enforcement presence to stop them from doing whatever they wanted. It was all changed now amidst the rampant chaos that was taking place everywhere, even in extreme eastern Indiana. People were taking whatever they wanted from whomever they could get it from. Kent figured they might as well go big.

Although there was a twelve foot tall fence around the entire facility, the guard station was easily accessed through the always open front gate. Since Goldfinch did not like to pay much of a wage, it was satisfactory that the guards there were usually some kind of nominal carbon unit. They were typically deprived of all sensory perception and of no deterrence whatsoever. Even now it never occurred to anyone at Goldfinch they would be brazenly invaded by ruthless killers and needed a serious, well-armed security presence.

Kent personally started the killing spree by pulling his concealed pistol from his shoulder holster, and shooting the unarmed aged security guard. As soon as the trio left the guard station and entered the Office, truck drivers heard the shooting and were racing their trucks out as fast as possible.

Next, the Manager of the Distribution Center, who Kent hated with a passion, was in the office, so he executed him on sight with his pistol. Two clerical women who were at the office that day were there trying to handle orders that were unfulfilled. But after the manager was shot, they took to the floor, cowering and begging to be let go. But while Kent was in the shooting mood, he thought it expedient to shoot the defenseless

women. Blood sprayed all over their desks and onto the family pictures they were displaying. DeGraff felt the office bitches were never satisfied with the job Kent did anyway, always acting like they had authority over him.

Minutes later, Dencil, another of the invaders saw a Company Truck parked in front of the frozen foods warehouse. The door was propped open to let in some light into the windowless structure. He quietly entered. A technician was in the dark watching the thermometer climb. The sound of water dripping down came from tens of thousands of invisible places in the dark. The office was a building separate from the freezer warehouse. The technician had not heard the shooting in the Office. Dencil brought the man into the office to Kent who said in his nasally voice, "Well, shoot him." Dencil did not want to do it. But Kent demanded it, so after some further coaxing, Dencil deduced that Kent was his meal ticket, so he killed the innocent man in spite of his impassioned pleas.

Like Dencil, Bill also was more apprehensive about all the unbridled murder and mayhem. His concept of the job was to just go in and take a year or two's worth of food and leave, then hide. Certainly he did not plan on any petty revenge killings.

Kent had other ideas. He figured no matter what they did, there would always be a tougher gang to out there to come along and take all of their loot, which was the entire Distribution Center. Therefore, in order to prevent that from happening, it was imperative to have the biggest and best defense, and offense. The killings were nothing personal, with the exception of his former coworkers, it was just a matter of "survival of the fittest".

Over the next several months, Kent continued to gain non-food assets in trade for his ill-gotten wealth. He wanted more troops, guns and ammunition, of course, furniture to make living quarters. He wanted a huge collection of archery equipment for the future time when everyone ran out of bullets and was willing to pay a premium for it.

The Clan leader also wanted to control those who had brains. They would be there to innovate and make the Goldfinch Clan a leader in reclaiming technology, primarily so they could stay ahead of any outside threats to his empire.

Also Kent chose from among abducted women who they found satisfactory as a low cost measure to please and to retain their male associates. Those not up to snuff were disposed of. It was easy and cost effective to exploit males by simply exploiting females. As a failure with women, Kent had no other use for women underlings of any other sort. During work hours they were to remain modestly clothed and were to be busy cleaning, and preparing meals so the men would not be distracted from their duties. But the women were warned not to displease any of the higher ranking men, so

there were no boundaries as to what kind of open activity might be seen during off hours.

All of Kent's warnings were heeded since he always followed through with zero compassion. Violence was pretty much the standing operating procedure for any situation in the Clan. Kent explained that "someone had to be in control," so he tyrannically micromanaged with an iron totalitarian fist.

One time one of his henchmen had gotten into some food. So he called for everyone together. He said in his cartoonish voice that having your own personal can opener or knife was a "no no," then he abruptly turned and shot the perpetrator. Two women immediately stepped forward to drag the dying perpetrator out of the building. Kent said in his calm whiney voice, "I am the best friend you will ever have. If you want something, all you have to do is ask." The listeners all agreed in earnest.

On another occasion a scavenger-supplier had allowed light rain fall into his open bucket of gas. Kent had him shot for trying to peddle diluted gas.

On yet another occasion Kent had two of his women expelled from the Center because none of the men found them interesting anymore. However, he did not shoot them because they had performed well and had not caused trouble. After they cussed him out for abandoning them, he changed his mind and personally shot them.

Kent, had become known as "The Emperor". From the food stockpiles he built a large security force who were privileged to eat and drink a full meal's rations twice a day. No amount of consumption could seem to put a dent into the enormous inventory, and in spite of the "sell by" dates, the food was commercially sterile and was shelf stable for years, although the contents of the cans would slowly turn to mush.

This colossal inventory gave The Emperor great power, which he felt he had earned. Emperor Kent never felt safe, never leaving his empire. But staying within his keep was no problem because outsiders eagerly brought him whatever he wanted. Because of his extreme and diverse personality deficiencies, the Emperor was never respected. DeGraff's minions were pleased with his uncomplicated style of leadership, providing them all of the amenities of a dog kennel of the highest order.

The Goldfinch Clan got so big that the Emperor finally had to delegate security to Dencil and the technology sector to Bill. Basically, all they needed to know about managing their areas was how to threaten the lives of any would-be underperformers.

There were no territorial aspirations for the despot. He preferred to remain secluded inside of the armed, fenced compound. But he wanted his think tank to come up with ways to make his paradise on Earth sustainable and defensible.

Bill Roentgen was one of the original three founders of the stolen, corrupt, empire of evil. He was the nervous type already, but the Emperor told him he wanted some "good ideas" soon or "someone" would have to be punished. He knew his status as one of the original three would not be sufficient to help keep him alive. Bill was far above average in intelligence, but suffered from severe emotional instability. He was brooding, temperamental, and unpredictable. He would think in expansive lateral terms, but then wallow in an endless gridlock of analysis that kept him from making a sometimes simple decision. Bill was in total fear for his life, but had to get past the fear and focus on the task at hand.

It was Roentgen's job to facilitate the think tank of brains that Kent had collected. Bill's think tank composed of a college engineering professor, a flunked out medical student, a gang lawyer, an ex- con who broke out of prison at the start of the collapse, and a law-bending real estate agent. These men were all assembled around a table that used to be a break room. They did not wear the garb of their professions, but typically wore sweat pants and a T-shirt, or whatever they felt like. They had full beards long like most.

The break room had several windows which made it one of the best lit rooms. The women kept the room as clean as it was the day it was taken over. The spotless vending machines were all cleared out when the hyperinflation made it impossible to do commerce using the worthless old US coins.

The think tank's job was to produce ideas to sustain and expand the Clan. No one was allowed into the room while the daily cogitation took place.

Bill sat slumped in his chair. His mind would always become lost on an inner space voyage.

This time his mind travelled at *warp speed* to desperately try and figure out a system for getting ideas. DaVinci or Edison must have had one.

Bill become lost in his thoughts. . . How is it that someone gets a great idea? Not everyone who has had a great idea must be a genius. Many of the great thinkers no doubt possess a superior intellect, but probably some of those who have contributed greatly seem a lot more gifted than they really are because of the brilliant ideas they have had. So perhaps some just put forth a more dedicated effort. Not all ideas require a lot of work, or a significant outlay of capital, but many do. Not all ideas require a high education, but to do anything within an applied science or technology, more than just the basics of that field should be understood. Is a great idea the result of a highly creative person? Or is the person just mentally able to break things down to its lowest common denominator? So what makes a great idea happen? The thinker must have

some mental ability, must know the subject of which they ponder, and they must think about it. There are an unlimited amount of roadblocks to serious thought.

Preoccupation with entertainment, sex, drugs, drink, hobbies. Bill thought he had to keep all of the distractions away. Kent would never go for that. But innovative thinking may be distracted by health issues, mental issues, emotional instability. Such things as day to day work, thoughts about the needs of others, while meritorious, can prevent as well as inspire innovation.

The lawyer nudged the real estate guy and pointed at Bill. They had seen this before.

Roentgen sat there, waving his arms around, his lips moving, as if he was in an argument with himself. Bill continued with the rapid fire thinking. . . Perhaps the biggest roadblock of all is a feeling of futility or lack of confidence. So it might not be productive to threaten the think tank with a gun. Maybe they are afraid to offer an idea that will not be accepted. It won't work, people will think it is crazy. Some will hate it because it is contrary to their strongly held beliefs. Usually the better the idea, the more people think it is crazy. By far, most people have no concept of stepping on the accelerator and will ride the brake their entire lives. They run their mouths against those who are trying to contribute. Or, as Machiavelli put it, "For he who innovates will have for his enemies all those who are well off under the existing order of things and only lukewarm support in those who might be better off under the new."

People who are capable of a great idea are also capable of good ideas. Perhaps a multitude of good ideas distracts one from a great idea. On the other hand, some lesser ideas may give the needed background or impetus to lead to the great idea. A well intentioned "mentor" may see how their charge, a would-be innovator may have the aptitude to help in the mentor's situation but sway the person away from his true calling. Any failure to follow this renown mentor may be considered a "total waste" or "under achievement" by his charge. Do truly great ideas come from God? Probably at least some do, but those who have great ideas are definitely not all godly people. God clearly will not recognize the Goldfinch Clan. But the Nazis had all the best stuff and most advanced technology in World War II and they were no paragons of virtue.

The ex-con asked Bill, "Are you gonna be okay?"

Bill looked like he was conducting an imaginary orchestra. "Yea, why wouldn't I be? Why don't you guys just do your job?" He went back to his thinking. . . A great idea is readily accepted if it provides some sort of convenience, especially if it is simple to implement. All the work is done up front. If there is some kind of reward in being the one who comes up with a great idea, there is always the possibility that the idea will be stolen. How do you protect an idea with no patent office?

Bill was shaking his head, and saying audibly "No! No! No! Damn it!" He thought why do you, or should you come up with a great idea? Is it for personal gain? For the benefit of all? Our economic system rewarded those much personal gain for ideas that benefitted many. At least prior to the rampant socialism. Those who are predisposed to ask "why do it?" may decide to not apply themselves toward innovation in the first place since the end reward is diminished or non-existent. Of course, there's always the issue of getting executed if you don't produce ideas. . . Roentgen put his hands on his throat, gagging.

Bill contemplated that since a great idea is not readily accepted, government as an entity cannot create a great idea. That explains why socialism or liberalism has never produced a great idea that works. The left has therefore been adept only at demagoguery. Free with their "compassion" and the tax revenues from those other than their own voter base. Any idea that is readily accepted because it sounds painless, is certainly never a great idea. Ideas for underachievers at the expense of those who produce. Selfless advances have only come from Christians. Bill was agreeing with himself whole-heartedly. Does it really matter? In the end does it really matter? All is futility. What benefit gained will stand the test of time? If nothing matters then why even worry about this? Few ideas are something that will benefit others beyond the lifespan of the innovator. Who cares about them anyways. They can think on their own. The innovator's passion for the idea must exceed all the negative forces, and right now Bill did not feel any passion for ideas.

Bill chewed his fingernails. Then he would drum his fingers or tap his feet. He would scratch. Sometimes you have no choice but to carry on. Fear makes it much easier to try. However some people, Roentgen thought, have a wide range of interests, but become passionate about very little or nothing, because they think things through and quit before they take any action. The more preparation and contemplation undergone before attempting something, start increasing doubts, which start sapping the will to initiate any action. The realized cost of reaching the goal becomes greater to the point the goal is deemed not worth the effort.

Bill felt he must remain enthusiastic or things will never progress as expected. Granted, they will probably end up a good bit worse. There are always some unexpected negative consequences, but enough about that. Bill shouted, "Every once in awhile, maybe not often, things will go right!"

"Okay! We get that!", the real estate agent shouted.

Bill said, "You idiots are disturbing me, so piss off!" He thought that after a long period of time conditions, even abnormal ones become accepted, because it is less painful to accept them rather than imagine them to improve. This becomes a systemic

futility, or is it a fundamental attribution error, meaning that it is the people who are to blame, not the situation. Maybe Kent is right to just "off" all the idiots. What good are they? Maybe he should just cap all of these useless morons. Nothing will change if things are always done the same. Like Einstein said, "The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking." Sounds so simple when you think about it. We have to get past negative thinking to innovate. . . .At that thought he snapped himself out of his trance and looked at the group who had been quiet non-participants for the last few hours.

The ex con knew it was time for him to present some input. He cleared his throat and said, "We get control over the Amish in the area and use their 19th century technology to get us over the technology hump."

Bill said, "Have you seen the Amish around here lately? They are all pacifists who probably didn't defend themselves at all while all of their possessions were hauled off. In fact, they are probably all dead." He pointed his finger at the ex-con. "Stupid."

The lawyer said, "We could destroy everyone's crops so we are the only ones who have any food."

"Wow," Bill said, "You think we're evil or something? That's just wrong. We are the good guys here, trying to help society."

The lawyer held up his hands in confusion.

It was the engineering professor's turn. "We could do research on how to produce our own gunpowder."

Bill shook his head. "Everyone knows how to do that already."

The real estate guy said, "Um. . .we could open a casino."

"Really?" Bill asked. "Open a casino. Isn't that just remarkable? Remarkably stupid."

The medical student offered, "We could go out and find what successful groups are doing."

Bill looked toward the floor as he spoke. "So in other words, we, meaning you, are not capable of thinking of an idea that is any better than what someone else out there is doing, ergo, we don't need this think tank; we don't need your contributions; we don't need you. These are all wrong answers. Here's the right answer; We use our contacts and influence to build a coalition of all groups weaker than us. The coalition becomes stronger than any single group. We trade our food for materials needed to start industry back up, such as a foundry. We produce items that have an inflexible demand such as hand tools and make enormous profits."

Chapter 10

November

Crawfordton continued to grow, doubling in size again to a population now in the thousands, perhaps more people than the forbidden Village of Delburg. On the western side of Crawfordton, the burg had grown out to farms controlled by Delburg. In the other directions, people settled as far out as they felt comfortable within the provided security arrangement. Those who tried to settle farther out had more room, and better pay, but less security.

In the original center section of Crawfordton, there was no more space for free range chickens. The backyard dogs all came up missing, including Thomas's beloved pet, Chuck.

The tax scheme of the Realm was still working out. Phil had enough money to pay his troops yet everyone was able to pay "their fair share".

The presence of a standing force on duty around the clock proved to be a deterrent to *bandenkreig*. But there were known groups of marauders nearby looking to kill and loot anyone who was defenseless in their homes or settlements and might have something to steal.

Fortifications in Crawfordton and especially the House of Crawford were more extensively dug-in as time passed. There were WWI style trenches around the House. New outposts were built farther out to the newest perimeter of the expanding town. The adjacent ten acre woodlot also became part of the expanding town as the wood was thinned out. Large trees were laboriously cut down with hand saws and axes. On both ends of the town huge very old oak trees were dropped across the road to keep all vehicles from using the road into the settlement.

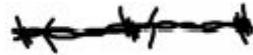
The season's harvest was over. Crawfordton's residents would have enough rations to get through the winter. Snow started to appear at times. Cars presented a nice sanctuary for the workers who didn't own or rent space in a house. Cars were good during the day with their solar thermal warmth. At night, they were cold, but they blocked the wind. So as long as their inhabitants cocooned themselves up with multiple layers of clothes and blankets it was tolerable. Living in the cars wasn't a major threat

to survival though as long as temperatures were above 30 degrees Fahrenheit. The worst type of home was generally the shanties. No one wanted to be in one in the cold.

During inhospitable weather the Crawfordton Library was a focal point. People would do their research on how to farm the following spring, and would also read a little fiction for some entertainment. Some enjoyed the nostalgia of the pre-collapse world, while others were tormented at any remembrance of its loss.

Land owners would host gatherings to buy and swap seeds from each other while exchanging valuable gardening information.

Everyone wanted to invest in ammunition, even if it was a caliber they had no gun that would shoot it. It seemed cartridges would only become more scarce as time passed, and with such an inflexible demand for ammunition to protect oneself, it certainly must go up in value. Practice shooting was rarely done and considered a waste of a nearly irreplaceable commodity.



The Latin Mafia was the largest group of marauders in the area, and could not be contested by any single household or small group. They had plundered another farm about 5 miles from Crawfordton.

The Latin Mafia Board of Directors sat around the kitchen table in the cold room.

"We have to start thinking about our future," Mo said. "We have to find a way to get more men, but there are no Latinos in this hillbilly place. . .that ain't got any hills."

Antonio said, "Maybe we should recruit some non-Latinos."

The Board was stymied by the suggestion.

"That violates our charter," said Marcos, one of the hood chiefs.

Antonio insisted, "No, it doesn't. If it did, then we need a new charter. That rule won't work. If we limit members to only Latinos, then we will be limiting ourselves for what reason? It's not efficient to think like that. We need to reinvent ourselves."

The Board members sat around looking at each other.

Antonio looked at the "LM" tattoo on his arm. They all had LM ink everywhere on their bodies. "Latin Mafia. . .Legion. . .Militia."

"Liberation Militia," hood chief Marcos suggested.

"I like that," Mo said. "Good, Marcos. Liberation Militia. And we don't wear black and red any more. We might as well wear a target. We dress like a regular Jose."

"And no more killing unless we have to." Carlos said, "If we keep fighting, we keep losing men. If we keep losing men, we get smaller. If we get smaller we will lose men faster. It's no good."

Mo was perturbed by Carlos' comment. His job was not to provide guidance for the gang. "All of our killings are necessary. How else are we going to eat?"

Carlos said, "With all of the firepower we got from Andy and the number of men we have, we should just be able to demand things. So we demand things from who we can, the rest we will try to make deals.

Antonio asked, "You mean we deal with the crazy hillbillies?"

Mo knew Antonio was referring to Crawfords. Mo objected, "No! We do not! You are not listening! We kill every last one of them! I'm serious!"

Carlos sighed at Mo's persistent grudge against an enemy proven to be tough. He was really starting to wish Mo would just forget about that grudge and just move on. They had lost too many men over the revenge crusade that was starting to seem insane.

Aliyah sent Elijah out for some potable water. It was a short walk, but always a wait in line to get it, unless it was like this time, in the wee hours of the morning. Oh great, he thought, he gets out there so early but he has to get in line behind Todd. Todd and Kevin moved into Elijah and Henry's cars which were still in the same spots so they were always around.

"Elijah. You're just the man I was looking for. Kevin wants to know if you guys need any work done."

"No, I think we're. . ."

Just then there was a woman's desperate shriek coming from a short distance toward the more wooded area to the west. Elijah instinctively decided to just run toward the scream.

There were a couple of people at the scene when Elijah got there. An distraught woman was being consoled by a couple of people. She was at her home, which consisted of a lean-to propped up against the back side of one of the houses. She pointed to Elijah a spot several meters away. "I think he was going over there."

Elijah went to the spot. He noticed on the ground there were drops of blood and a worn trail going into the woods that could be seen in the dusty cover of snow. It would not take a *Sherlock Holmes* or a *Batman* to figure out that the woman's husband was attacked with a blunt object and drug to the woods by two assailants. He probably had walked over to the edge of the woods to urinate.

Two Guardsmen rushed to the scene to investigate.

"You better follow that trail, and I mean right now," Elijah said, even though it was dark out and nearly impossible to see in the woods.

"I'll go with you," One of them told Elijah, then he told the other Guardsman to get help.

"Go with me?!" Elijah asked. Elijah tried to recall what he had said. He didn't remember saying anything about going on a manhunt. Oh well, just chalk another one up to destiny. He still grumbled, but fully believed the trail had to be tracked before it got stale. His pistol was in its holster just like always so he told the Guardsman, "Whoever was on guard last night, should have seen or heard this happen! Let's go!"

The men started trotting while looking at the plainly observable trail. The path took Elijah and the Guardsman through the adjacent woodlot and out the other side. If it wasn't for the light snow, they would have had no chance whatsoever to do any tracking in that amount of light.

The trail took them out of the woods and another two miles that led across a grown over open field and toward another woodlot. The woodlot was a quarter mile square on each side surrounded by open field on all sides. As long as they stayed out of the woods there was enough moonlight to easily see a figure running around, even in the distance.

"Oh crap." Elijah stopped, huffing and puffing with his hands on his knees. "This is going to kill me. Give me two seconds."

Elijah saw that a squad of Guardsmen were rapidly catching up to them. "Might as well wait." He knew he couldn't run for awhile, so he sat his butt on the cold ground.

It was Sgt. Angel followed by a squad of troops who were fleet on their feet.

"They can't be too far," Elijah told Angel.

Bart Keller told Angel, "I know they're in there."

Brian, the older brother said, "If we walk in there, we're dead meat."

The others looked at him as if he were trying to make a ghastly pun.

Elijah told Angel, "You know it would be nice if you guys would let the rest of us know if you know something sinister is going on around here."

Angel said, "Yea but then whoever is doing this would know that we know. Anyways, I don't have time for this right now. They're probably watching us right now." Angel was very anxious over the situation. Sgt. Angel did not want to squander this chance to take the initiative to stop the threat. But if they charged in directly, he saw almost certainly multiple casualties. There was no way to know how many of them were in the woods.

Elijah said, "I know you don't want to lose any men, but this is a battle that must be won." Elijah remembered an appropriate quote that one of his Marine Corps superior officers had uttered more than once, so he repeated it to Angel. "'If you find yourself in a fair fight, you probably haven't prepared well enough.' We could put them under siege, but that will take too long. Nope. We have to attack. We have to face them and eliminate them. We can't let creeps keep nabbing people out of town, but let's do this thing smartly."

Angel said, "All right, here is what we will do;" Sgt. Angel said with authority, "Kellers," meaning both of the brothers. "You two and Taylor go wide out and around the woodlot and stay in back. Stay there until we come and get you. Remember, their eyes are probably going to be on you all the time. Mercer, go back and tell the Captain what is going on, and request their advice. We will hunker down here until you get back."

During the wait, Elijah asked Angel, "We are going to see some crap in there, aren't we?"

"More than likely. We're pretty sure there are some hunter cannibals operating in our area. They could be in that woodlot."

Elijah asked, "Why the hell would those sick bastards want to eat human? We get along okay without eating our own and we only live a couple three miles from here."

"I guess they have just acquired a taste for people," Angel said.

The sun was starting to come up at their backs.

"Look!" Angel said. "Up ahead. Look at all those turkey buzzards flying over that woodlot. Not good."

Mercer returned about an hour after he left with a couple more troops from F Squad. "Sergeant, Lieutenant Miller is leading D Squad over there," he started to point.

"Don't point!" Angel scolded, knowing that the enemy might infer their overall plans.

"Sorry Sergeant. Lieutenant Miller is leading D Squad up the deep ditch by the road that is about a quarter mile north of the woods. There is no way that the enemy can see them taking up a position there. We are supposed to put a couple guys on the south side, then advance slowly until they shoot or run out to the north."

Angel thought it seemed like a good plan, although he worried that zombies might respond differently than expected. They were on the east side of the woods. He already had three guys on the west side. He pointed to the two F Squad members, and told them to go out to the south side and around and slowly advance on their bellies or on all fours toward the woods unless they were shot at.

Before the F Squad men even got into position, an armed Clan of about a dozen people, fearing encirclement, started fleeing the woods to the north. They were running full speed, wielding rifles and large blades.

D Squad had completed their slog through some ice cold water in the ditch and were waiting in position.

Lt. Miller, who led D Squad into position via the ditch had put a pile of dried grass on his head for concealment. Henry was slowly peeking up from the ditch. Speaking in a hushed tone, he said, "Here they come. Okay, when they get closer, we are going to take them all down. Stay down until I give the word.

When the Clan was about 50 yards from the ditch, Lt. Miller said, "Execute!"

D Squad popped up.

"Trap!" one of the Clansmen screamed. Some stopped, some tried a futile charge and some tried to retreat.

But D Squad brought them down in a deafening symphony of death, every last one in mere seconds.

Hearing the shooting, Guardsmen on the other three sides stopped. Realizing the plan had worked they all advanced at a normal pace toward the woods. It was light enough to see in the woods by this time.

Evidence showed the woods had been used by the Clan for quite some time. There were well worn paths throughout the woods. They lead to a central clearing that had a large fire pit that was surrounded by sleeping quarters fashioned from leaning piles of wood. There was the smell of rotten protein death in the air.

Angel's B Squad were the first to see it. A pile of human bones with the flesh picked from them. Human heads laying in a pile that still had the expressionless faces on them. A naked man's body neatly carved into slices lay near the fire pit on a tarp. The head of the missing man was looking blankly at the rest of his own corpse.

Elijah figured this hideous spectacle was right up there near the top of his list of all time worst things he had seen in his life. But he was trained to always look for clues. While doing so, he had to ask himself, what was he really doing here? No one made him come there and he really felt that he made no difference. Aliyah was probably worried sick.

Some of the Guardsmen were understandably looking away and puking at the gruesome site. They all pretty much knew the cannibalism was going on, but were still nauseated by the revolting sight of it.

The other troops from all sides started to arrive at the clearing in the woods. Their reaction to the horror was the same.

Pvt. Bart Keller was throwing up. While bent over, he saw a child's foot, or at least a muddy shoe underneath some brush. How could this get any worse? He took the barrel of his gun to pull away the brush. The whole leg was there with a sock on it. Ironically, it was even more shocking when the leg moved rather than be a dismembered part of a child's body. He said, "Hey, there's a kid. . ."

Just then a haggardly woman lurched at Bart from behind a large tree with a large butcher knife. She had a bloody mouth and red teeth. Her hair had globs of coagulated blood in it. Her deep set eyes were alive with a fearful rage. She obviously only had one good leg so couldn't flee with the others but was close enough to make a lunging attack on Bart. Bart reactively held up his weapon crosswise to block the swing of her knife hand. Bart's brother, Brian swung his weapon around to shoot the hag, but missed. The knife passed over Bart's weapon and plunged fully into Bart's upper chest.

Brian leaped toward his mortally wounded sibling and brother in arms. He simultaneously pulled his own combat knife and ran it into the side of the neck of the berserk cannibal. Blood sprayed back over both of the Kellers.

Bart and his killer collapsed dead on the spot. Brian retrieved his knife and furiously plunged the blade into her back several more times.

Pvt. Wesley Crawford said, "That kid! I'm gonna shoot it! It's a freak!"

Sergeant Angel said, "No! Stand down!"

"That kid is a sicko!" Wesley shouted, as he was physically shaking with rage.

"I said stand down!" Angel went over to the cowering child who was hugging the deceased woman. The child was a small girl of about 6 years.

Taylor sided in with Wesley, "Sarge, no one is going to want to even look at that freak. Just leave her here."

"Absolutely not. She is guilty of nothing. I won't, no matter what! So just shut up now! I will shoot you myself!"

Taylor turned away, muttering to himself.

Elijah was confused by their strong opinions one way or the other about the girl. He found himself not caring at all about her. No mixed feelings. Nothing. He only wanted to know his own daughter was all right.

"E! What in the world are you doing here?" Henry asked.

"I was a first responder."

"Oh. Good work. Although this operation would not make a good recruiting commercial."

"Well, it was an ugly job, but you guys got it done," Elijah said.

"Thanks for helping out, Elijah," Angel said. "You did make a difference."

"I didn't do nothing Sarge."

Lt. Miller noticed the girl, but said nothing. He had seen so much in his lifetime that he was immune to shock. "Sergeant, you should have had the area cleared before you stood down. I know there was a lot to look at there, but just reminding you for you and your men's own sake."

"Yes sir. You are right. We'll do better."

"The subject will not be brought up again," Henry said.

Elijah knew that there would have been a big inquiry into Angel's actions had the incident occurred in either the professional military or police force.

On the march back, the chatter behind Angel's back started. Grumblers were at the back of the column speaking quietly, to not be heard.

"I won't be going over to Angel's house for a barbeque," Taylor said.

"Why not?" Wesley asked, "Because of the little ghou. . .I mean girl? The spawn of the random bitch who killed Bart?"

"She'll be a problem that will really be eating at him," Taylor punned badly. "But she's definitely a people person."

At the front of the column, Lt. Miller asked Angel, "Who is going to take care of that kid? You?"

"If I have to."

"You may have to. This is your business, not mine, but I don't think she will get along with anyone in town. She probably helped consume a guy who has a family there. Her mommy from hell killed a soldier who happened to be a great guy. It won't be pretty."

"Yes sir. But if everyone is so against cannibalism, then why would I send her out on her own to be eaten by a cannibal?"

"No no, this is all strictly your business." Lt. Miller looked at her. She was walking steadily with a total look of shock on her face. "What's your name?" Henry said to the girl.

She wouldn't, or couldn't speak.

Once the troops and the girl returned to Crawfordton, a burial detail was sent out to tend to their fallen comrade and then buried the intermingled parts of the victims in a compact mass grave. The cannibals were left for the buzzards.

The Keller family was heartbroken at the death of their admirable son, Bart. He was given a hero's recognition. The whole town greeted Sgt. Brad Keller, Pvt. Brian Keller, and Mrs. Keller. Everyone were grateful that so many of the murderous cannibals had been eliminated. The perpetrators of the abduction problem were at least thinned out, if not eliminated.

As expected, many looked upon the little girl with contempt. "How could the Preacher keep such a horribly defiled animal?" "What a slap in the face to the Keller Family."

Angel cleaned her up and made an effort to make her look as civilized as possible, but makeovers were not his specialty.

The Lieutenant escorted Tammy to the Sunday church service again. This time it was more than just to be with Tammy, but it was still about that too. If it came down to Henry thinking the doctrine taught at the church was bad, he would quit attending. So far, he was still undecided.

They sang *Amazing Grace* again at this service. At the end of it, Preacher Angel said, "This song is very fitting for the message today. God saved the author of that song, who was a repentant slave trader. We all have an idea of how bad that is. You may have an idea of how those innocent people were treated. Rest assured, it was probably far worse than whatever you can imagine.

Maybe we should only base God's forgiveness on how bad we think the sin is. Maybe some people have sinned too much that God cannot save them? Maybe we should quit singing the song. Absolutely not! God saved that song's author. He will save you too if He has not already. I want to read some scriptures out of the Bible for you. Romans chapter three, verse twenty three says, *all* have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Romans three ten; There is none righteous, no not one." Angel paused, "I said the same thing last week, the week before that, and every week, and if God lets me keep doing this, I'll keep on saying it. You need Jesus to get to Heaven!"

"Amen," was heard throughout the congregation.

You may think 'yea but' this, or 'yea but' that, but save the 'yea buts' for some Bible study session. It's great if that you want to be scholarly about your investigation, but then after you do that it is time to exercise some faith in God. You need to take care of this right now. We are all living on borrowed time! No more so than now, Ladies and Gentlemen. Romans 10:9 says that 'if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved'. Also in Romans 10:13 says, 'for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Henry Miller felt like the message was directed right at him. Of course, it might have been, either by the Preacher, or God. His head was believing it. His heart was believing it. It was time to settle.

Everyone knew about the controversy with the "Zombie Princess". The girl was sitting motionless in the front row of folding chairs.

The Preacher continued, "Only Jesus can save your soul. You will not get to God's Heaven without him. We read in the Book of Revelation, behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him and he with me." Angel looked up from his Bible. "That is very simple ladies and gentlemen. We all need Jesus, and he has already forgiven our sins no matter what they are and wants to offer his gift of Salvation to all. What will you do? Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to invite anyone forward today who has a burden they want to settle today. What is God laying on your heart?"

Amy Crawford stood. She walked to the front of the congregation and approached Angel's foster child. Amy led the girl out of the chair with her hand and knelt down to hug her. "Hi little darling." Amy gave her a hug. "Angel, I am going to adopt this child." She proceeded with the girl back to her seat by Phil.

Angel could not continue. He already lived in the same house as the Crawfords, so there would be no physical change of address for the girl. But Amy's expression of an emotional bond with the girl was new and unexpected. The burden of how to care for a troubled little girl who was universally despised had been lifted. He was willing to leave town to protect the girl if he had to, but it was now, thanks to Amy Crawford, that drastic step would not be necessary. Angel was moved by Amy's compassionate commitment as he choked back the tears. "Amy. . ."

Jayden stood and said, "God save the Queen!"

Others stood and said, "Amen!" and "God save the Queen!"

"Thank you Lord. Praise God Almighty," Angel said losing his battle to fight back the tears.

Henry stood boldly and went to the front, as did a husband and wife. People beamed with happiness. All of the hardships of life they had gone through had been worth it, because the spiritual benefits of Salvation last for eternity. The three souls walked up to Angel's open arms and got a hug. Tim Crawford went with them into the house to talk things over and pray with them, leading them to Christian Salvation through Jesus. It was as simple as that.

Chapter 11

February

Activity was nearly at a standstill in frigid Crawfordton. People would go to the morning forum or send someone from the house to pick up on the news. This happened no matter how bad the weather. The Crawford House used a hand crank short wave radio at to get news from other regions of the world. Over the last couple of months there was a lot of disturbing news from around the United States. The once supremely powerful Union was undergoing a radical dismemberment.

The State of Texas declared that it was once again the Republic of Texas. The old saying, "Don't mess with Texas", still rang true. The Texas electric grid was still in place, and Texas was still rich in energy resources. There were a lot of other types of shortages of various commodities in Texas, but Texans were well defended and dealt with crime expeditiously.

Utah was now a autonomous nation. It was self-described as the Mormon Republic of Utah. Utah also claimed territory without opposition in southern Idaho, which had a high proportion of Mormons.

Hawaii took the opportunity to declare independence. Many wondered what conquering Asian amphibious force would soon come to their barely defended shores.

The Governor of Alaska requested that their State become part of Canada and was given provisional acceptance. The provision being any contingent objection by the US would be considered. But almost everyone agreed such an objection seemed unlikely. Canada immediately issued a "hands off" statement to Russia, saying they would vigorously defend Alaska, and backed it up by moving military assets there.

Other States also wanted to join Canada, but Canadians were cautious about inheriting more problems without gaining much of a benefit. The Americans had ruined one country, why let them come up there and do it again? Canada was already getting a flood of illegal aliens from the US. Their power grid was not down.

New England was under the "protection" of Homeland Security and the United Nations. The liberal east with its narcissistic personality disorder knew it was the most important region. The Midwest and South were just "fly-over-country". The real America between the east and the west coasts would be able to get along on their own somehow, with their farms and such. There were small pockets in the northeast where electric power was restored.

Reports from Homeland Security made it sound like violence in the Northeast was being handled by disarming the citizens; at least violence against the government. There were still many in the Northeast who would never submit to HS tyranny. It was only a matter of time before elements of the government started behaving more tyrannical against the mostly unarmed populace since they could, and it would be for everyone's own good.

Urban dwellers were totally oblivious to the realization that farmers couldn't farm in the modern way because they had no fuel or transportation. They couldn't dry their grain, run any of their farm equipment, nor perform a host of modern agriculture tasks that were dependent upon energy. The lack of crop production in the Midwest United States was about to cause a severe worldwide food shortage of apocalyptic proportions.

Many rival nations coveted the valuable croplands in the Midwest, and were willing to do anything to restore production. But the worldwide food shortage kept would-be expeditionary forces at home to police their own hungry malcontent populations.

The Southwestern part of the US was in turmoil between the Spanish and English speaking populations. Spanish speaking gangs were taking over all areas west of Texas.

The fractured Southland was consumed with fear between the races because of what a few racists had perpetrated on each other. Very few people are inclined to shoot another Human being simply because of their race, but almost all people will shoot if they fear they will be attacked. Once the violence started, then almost everyone had a *casus belli* against someone from another race and the cycle grew and was self perpetuating. Escalation of the race war devolved into unspeakable depredations and more reprisals. The days of having opportunities to make an effort to get along were long since passed.

Initially, those who felt superior in some ways, or had predetermined ideas that those of the other race were bad were to blame. But also, those who previously claimed victimhood on the basis of race, for personal gain, deserved their fair share of the blame. If everyone had chose to all get along before, rather than strive for separation to perpetuate more victimhood benefits, they would have at least had a chance to curtail the murderous bedlam.

There were no organized State or large local governments in the south, east of Texas. The fear was that eventually this social total meltdown would happen, and

when it did, the spoils would go to the most brazen killers, who don't generally make the most capable leaders.

Many Crawfordtonians would trudge through the crunchy snow and frigid air to the library every few days and see what was available, or return their books. Scavengers were always keeping their eyes open for more books while looking for valuables. The library's collection started to fill most of Mrs. Welch's house. The book collection took up half of Mrs. Welch's house. But her old e-book reader had virtually every book available on it. She couldn't use the quaint electronic device which she loved so much anymore. She did love to run the library because she enjoyed books and loved the company of its patrons.

Henry went to the library to research theological questions that popped into his head. He thought that people would want to talk more openly about something so important, but they seemed to avoid the subject like a plague.

Since the time Queen Amy adopted the little girl, who people called the "Zombie Princess", she still had not spoken. So not knowing her given name, Amy named her "Angela" after the girl's benefactor, Angel. Amy wondered if she was cut out for raising a severely emotionally disturbed child who had been through such unthinkable circumstances.

At least when there was a moderate amount of snow on the ground, residents could go out to the edge of the settlement and gather up snow to melt for water over a community fire. This was a nice break from all of the pumping and hauling of potable water.

A sentry at the north OP spotted a somewhat heavy man on the other side of the "Sniper at Work" sign. He was in army fatigues waving a white flag and appeared unarmed. A runner was sent to inform those in the House.

Captain Jayden Phipps and two Guardsmen walked through the crunchy snow out on the road and waved to the man to approach.

The sixtyish rotund man approached Jayden and extended his hand in friendship. "Major Chris Wilcox, Third Ohio Militia," he said.

Jayden accepted the handshake, hoping that this meeting could be the start of something constructive and long lasting. "Captain Jayden Phipps, Crawfordton Guard."

The Major wondered whether Jayden had the numerical strength under him to warrant the rank of Captain. "Captain, we are looking to establish allies, or perhaps

those who may choose to join us. Can we talk to see if we are like minded?"

"That is good news, Major. My apologies, but I'll go ahead and have my Guardsmen clear you before you go inside to talk to our leader."

The Guardsmen did a cursory search of the Major. There was not much loose clothing on him to conceal anything.

"That's fine," Jayden told them, not wanting to get too personal about it.

They proceeded up to the house, crossing the checkpoint at the driveway. Jayden watched the Major as he observed the fortifications around the house.

"Not bad," the Major said.

"Thank you, sir," the Captain said. Jayden couldn't help but notice the unit shoulder patch the Major was wearing. He was one of the hard-core devoted militia guys who had been preparing for this kind of a situation for a long time. The patch was clearly something that had been made prior to the collapse.

They entered the house. Phil was already in the foyer, meeting with Lt. Henry Miller.

Jayden said, "Phil, this is Major . . .ummm"

"Major Chris Wilcox, Third Ohio Militia. Glad to meet you sir. So. . .what is your title here?"

"I am the Benevolent Dictator of Crawfordton," Phil said, half joking.

"We call him King, but he doesn't really go for it," Henry said.

"I suppose the good ones don't care about titles so much," Chris offered.

"He is definitely a good one," Henry added. "He's managed to do a lot without being a totalitarian micromanager."

"King Phil, we are trying to organize a confederation in Ohio. We realize that the United States is a mess and it will take a lot to bring democracy back," Major Chris said.

"Democracy is overrated," Phil said. "Once people figure out how to use government to get things from someone else without having to do anything for it, the whole thing collapses. Democracy is what caused our ruin."

The Major was taken aback. "Would you agree that we need some kind of government, a common currency. . ."

"I'll stick with metals," Phil said. "No one is going to trust any funny money for a long time. We should have never taken our money off of the gold standard to begin with. You aren't going to try and take our guns are you?"

"No sir. We believe in the US Constitution and the Second Amendment. That is one of the founding principles of our militia. We want to establish a confederation that promotes free trade, sharing of technology, and a common defense. Hopefully we can then unite with other like-minded States."

Phil paused for a long moment. "Here's the thing. I don't want to get us into anything we want out of. If we don't like it, can we leave?"

"You must understand that we cannot have a flimsy group that will dissolve at the first difficulty."

"I'll concede that, for now." Phil paused again. "Let's suppose that one of the confederation members commits some grievous offense to cause someone outside of the confederation to attack them. Are we bound to defend that member?"

"You will have the ability to make that choice on your own, but the Confederation already has its own army that the Chairman directs."

Phil asked, "How much of the State has already agreed to join?"

Major Wilcox pulled out a map of Ohio's 88 counties that showed the Confederation's sphere of influence Gerrymandering across the State. "We have most of 15 counties as members. As you can see we are the largest group in Ohio." The political map of Ohio showed dozens of various entities, mostly very small; in rural areas. There were many areas on the map that included sections of counties. "There are some large groups out there that are tyrannical and a threat to small settlements like this one."

Phil studied the map. There were some large black splotches where the large metropolitan areas were, including the 3 "C"s; Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati. The Confederation's capitol was west of Columbus. Phil read off some of the names of groups on the political map. "The Buckeyes; North Ohio Republic; The Marlow Kingdom; North Shore; Bearcats; Ohio Valley; USA 2.0; They don't sound too ominous."

"They're not going to call themselves 'hate mongering totalitarian mutant zombies', which some of these are," the Major said.

Although keenly interested, Phil looked up from the map. "I suppose not. Do we have to pay a tax?"

"Yes, there will be a small tax, almost nothing."

"How small?"

"Two dollars per year, per adult. This goes to support a standing army. Also, compulsory military service between the ages of 20 and 25. Five years of service."

Phil raised his eyebrows over the military service requirement. "So, what are we really getting for this tax?"

"A chance to be part of a bigger country than these acres you have here; an opportunity to increase prosperity through a more diverse economy; and to have an Army big enough to be a deterrent to any would be invaders. You wouldn't be a King any more, of course. Each County elects a Representative. The Representatives choose the Chairman of Ohio, and vote on how the money is spent."

"And the Representatives will be able to raise taxes, right?" Phil asked.

"Well. . . Yes they could."

"Then they will," Phil said, shaking his head as he could see a repeat collapse sometime in the future.

"So, Ohio is going independent, huh?"

"Ohio and everyone else. At least for now."

Phil asked yet another question, "We are only some ten miles from the Indiana State line. What if they offer us a better deal?"

"Indiana?" The Major was surprised. "But you're in Ohio."

"Does Ohio really exist, or is it just an old line in the dirt no longer observed?" Phil paused. "Major, can you come back in a week for our answer?"

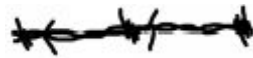
"That would be great, Phil."

After the Major left, Phil asked, "He's a Major? Our army has gotten quite a bit larger lately. Jayden, congratulations, you are being promoted to Major."

"Thank you sir," he said, smiling at the promotion, and the one-upmanship, and the fact that the promotion offered no increase in pay, and as the highest ranking Guardsman, Jayden's promotion was in name only.

Phil continued, "Henry, you are a Captain now. Choose a couple of lieutenants."

"Thank you sir. I will."

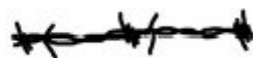


The next day after the bell tolled thrice, and after the date and announcements had been made, Phil made another announcement. "In three days we will have an election here in town." We will vote to determine if we will continue to live under the present system, or you will vote in favor of joining the Ohio Confederation." Phil gave more details about the County Representative, the mandatory conscription and taxes. If they did join the Confederacy, the Guard would be half its present size. Phil felt certain the community was happy already and would readily reject the idea.

There was continual buzz in town about the coming vote from that point forward. Noah Thomas, who never really was satisfied with being under his neighbor's rule had the advantage of having the forum in his back yard. He spent his free time lobbying for the Confederation. He told visitors that perhaps he had a political future in the upstart nation and maybe he could help them out.

Noah was telling a group, "Why would we not want to join with Ohio? It sure seems more like a legitimate government that could do a lot more for us than Phil Crawford. We have fought and worked on our own to survive. Remember that Phil said he would never do anything for us. We don't really need our lives to be directed from that secretive house across the road. The tax would actually be lower and our young will have to serve in the army one way or the other anyway."

Sophia Thomas was also in agreement that joining sounded like a good opportunity. Twice during the previous year they were fighting literal battles for their lives that could have been easily lost.



A couple of days later a sound echoed off of the houses early in the morning. *clop. clop. clip. clop.* People looked out of their windows and saw a couple of men on horseback carrying rifles casually coming up Harris Road.

Noah Thomas saw them out the window. He mentioned to Sophia, "They must not be that hungry in Delburg if they can ride around on horses."

"ewww!" Sophia said.

"You must not be that hungry either." But all Noah could see were some steaks passing by. Noah pondered the change in situation from earlier times. He had spent his entire adult life working, thinking, studying, to gain technical knowledge. People looked to him for answers. Now all his experience was worthless. He knew very little about how to live in the present system. He hated being at the bottom. It was unnatural

that he would be a peon with all of his talent. Wasn't it true, like everyone told him, he was supposed to be the best he can be?

A squad of Guardsmen were soon upon the riders.

"Halt!" a Sergeant commanded.

The riders casually stopped, familiar with such protocols. "We are from Delburg," one of the men said. "We want to speak with Phil Crawford."

Captain Henry Miller interrupted, "Gentlemen, why don't you let these Guardsmen hold your weapons for you while we take you to Phil."

The riders dismounted then handed over their weapons and led the horses to the mailbox and tied there. They started to graze on the ground cover that grew there.

Tim Crawford, the horticultural advisor was standing by, said, "I wouldn't let those horses eat that crown vetch; Its toxic to animals."

The Lieutenant led them in the house to Phil. The big long haired athletic looking man with a cowboy hat had a slow, confident stride. The other guy, a short guy, wore a very stained and dingy police uniform, including his baseball style hat. He had a "Delburg Police Department" shoulder patch and enough pins and ribbons to make someone think he might get a citation for pulling over granny.

Phil and Jayden joined them in the small foyer, which had better lighting than other parts of the house. Everyone was seated in cheap plastic chairs. There were sandbags placed against the outer wall as a hidden protection against gunfire. This arrangement took up floor space which made the already crowded seating arrangement in the small room tighter yet.

"Mr. Crawford, I am Ethan Mentzer of the Village of Delburg." The big man had a sparse blonde beard and long blonde hair flowing past his shoulders from under a worn cowboy hat, giving him a cowboy-Viking look. He smelled like a cowboy. Probably smelled like a Viking too, but Phil never smelled one before.

"Oh, did they let you out?" Phil asked sarcastically without a hint of joking, in reference to the "Delburg Curtain", and all of the lack of cooperation between them since the collapse.

The short policeman laughed nervously. By himself.

Ethan looked off balance a bit after Phil's Delburg Curtain comment. "We feel it has been in our own self interest to keep strangers out of Delburg. I'm sure you can

understand that. But the reason we are here is that we wanted to discuss a visit we got from the Ohio Confederation."

"Really? Phil asked, feeling that older-than-Ethan-man-confidence. "Can you tell me more about it?"

Feeling a slightly more relaxed, Ethan Mentzer explained the details of the Confederation as if Crawfordton had no prior knowledge of it and then said, " We want to know if you think joining it is a good idea or not?"

Phil figured that information was on a need-to-know basis. "What does Delburg think about it?"

"If you join, we want to join. . .at least some of us. If you don't then we don't want to either."

Phil said, "That's interesting." Phil wondered if Delburg's stance had come from their complete trust or complete mistrust of Crawfordton. "Try to see it from our point of view. You are asking us to make decisions based upon circumstances that include Delburg. We have not been to Delburg through this entire thing. All we know is that you like to take production from area farmers."

Trying to skirt their differences, Ethan said, "I understand, but if you join, we are considering also joining and becoming a more open town again. Besides, there is not much to see there."

Phil imagined that this meeting could be an opportunity to avert a future "cold war" with the neighboring snobby town who was essentially admitting, at least partially, that their fear of Crawfordton kept them a closed town. "So what if we don't join?" Phil asked.

"Then we will continue to build other alliances. We have very strong ones already."

"Like who?" Phil prodded.

"The Liberation Militia and the Armistead County Sportsmen's Club."

It was hard to say what the beer drinking hunters from the Sportsmen's Club would amount to as a formal ally. Phil said, "I never heard of that Militia. Liberation from what? Sounds like 'hope and change', or 'change you can believe in'."

The Delburg emissaries looked at each other. They clearly had never considered the intent of the Liberation Militia name before.

Ethan said, "They are very strong, and they also are affiliated with other clans who are allies. They are all the way down from Michigan."

"Huh?" Henry was surprised. "Yea, we know them. They are a bunch of Mexican guys, right?"

"Yea, they are actually."

Henry looked at Jayden and Phil and they discreetly connected the dots. They all got it that the Liberation Militia was just a pseudonym for Latin Mafia.

Jayden, wanting to be sure, asked, "They dress in black and red, don't they?"

"No," Ethan said and looked at his partner. They both shook their heads, wondering where that question came from, or where the line of questioning was going.

Phil asked, "How does this Militia feel about you joining the Confederation?"

"Um. . .I really don't. . ." Ethan stammered. "I am not sure." They wondered again why so many questions about their ally.

Clearly the LM was the stronger member of the Delburg-LM alliance and no doubt exploited their superior position over the town of Delburg. Perhaps Delburg was paying the price of their isolationist doctrine. All someone had to do was cut off their agriculture take from the surrounding areas to control them.

Phil wanted to plead with him to not trust the LM. But what if they disregarded his pleas? Would that force Delburg to polarize from Crawfordton toward the LM? Phil was satisfied that he let the Vikingish-cowboy do most of the talking. "Come back in three days and we will let you know our decision."

The men left, agreeing to come back in three days.

Chapter 12

Although Phil was a type of Monarch, he decreed that there be a vote on joining the realm with the Ohio Confederation. Most in Crawfordton saw the passage of this vote as an opportunity to seize the inevitable opportunity that would bring the old normal back. It's seemed only natural, if not inevitable to many that Ohio would become a functioning State again, then the United States would be recreated, then the US would become the world power it once was. Even now, many still believed that the collapse and subsequent conditions was still an aberration that could only be temporary.

Phil was becoming aware that the community which was springing up all around his house was excited to join the Coalition, but to him this amounted to a no-confidence vote. Phil was instrumental in setting up the entire system. It was working as well as anyone should expect. In his way of thinking, those who questioned the system were part of an ungrateful populace. But Phil had mixed feelings; he would not want to hold the people back if the Coalition was the better choice. What if it did save all their lives? Maybe the current situation had outgrown him. In order to be fair, he was satisfied with his decision to put the matter to a vote.

Phil never wanted to be a King, he just wanted to help those around him because he wanted to provide some stability to the surrounding area. He walked out to the road in front of the House, along with those going to the vote.

He looked at the miserable conditions of many. They were too busy tending to their immediate needs to care about what the vote stood for.

Voting was to take place at the south end of the town. There was no place else available among the crowded shanties and parked vehicles used for living quarters. The forum area in Thomas's back yard was now filled up with shanties and could not accommodate a large group.

Once voters got to the polling place, they cast their vote on the referendum by telling Captain Henry Miller and Noah Thomas, who separately kept a tally of all of the votes. After their vote was cast, then voters were not allowed to pass back over the line until all voting had been completed.

People who had already voted kept trying to crowd around the polling spot to hear how others were voting. Jayden and others kept telling the encroaching crowd to stand back.

Although there was a large crowd who voted, about two-thirds of the Crawfordtonians did not. The final vote for Crawfordton to join the Ohio Confederation was; For: 443, Against: 256.

After Jayden announced the results, there was a hearty cheer. It seemed that those who were for the vote were much more zealous than those who were against it. Among those who were not for the referendum were those who either did not want to go into the mandatory military service or those who just didn't know enough about the Confederation to want to commit to the group.

Everyone wondered what was to happen next. Phil put the word out that they would have to wait until someone from the Confederation came back to let them know. "I hope this is a positive turning point in our history. I never wanted to be where I was not wanted," he said. With that he fought hanging his head in disgust. It was difficult for Phil to not take the crowd's jubilation over the passage as a slap in the face.

Elijah saw the Viking-cowboy getting on his horse. As always, Henry informed Elijah who he was, so Elijah knew the cowboy was obviously taking the news of the vote back to Delburg. Was Delburg up to no good, or were they just looking out for their own self interests?

Phil paused to look up at his Gadsden flag, flapping defiantly in the soft breeze. He remembered the day when he didn't have the belly to fly the US flag any more. When it was no longer possible to separate the Country from the Government. When he looked at the US flag, it was no longer a majestic symbol of courage, freedom and greatness. The Stars and Stripes was a symbol that represented a fallen empire, populated with selfish malcontented factions who were actively dismantling it to feed their own self-interests. The US flag was flown in front of every money sucking public sector institution, run by corrupt scandal ridden agencies who offered transfer of wealth goodies for votes.

It was a woeful thing to think that the best country that ever was, would become a short lived enigma compared to the great empires in history. The best situation in history was being thrown away by those too ignorant to recognize it.

The so-called greatest generation, the World War II generation, some of whom Phil knew personally. While not perfect, these were people of character. They were all gone now, replaced by selfish people of little character who were now getting the government that they deserved.

America and its citizens, mostly in the name of Christianity, had done so much to help the well being of the entire world. America had improved the lives of almost everyone worldwide with all manners of agricultural goods and methods, medical advances and humanitarian gestures. The American medical system was gutted by government bureaucratic meddling and was no longer the innovative sector which dealt with major outbreaks or came up with new cures. Now there was no more United States and Americans were not exporting anything.

Throughout America's history, they sent their precious sons and daughters to go off to wars to spill their blood to help the weak, who in turn often times rewarded us with their hatred. Who will help the US now. Not just indirectly, to help themselves, but really help us? Will any of our so-called allies come and help us in our hour of need? It didn't help matters that the executive branch of the government in recent years had been cozy with our enemies and worse than neglectful of our allies.

It is the ignorant and selfish people who empowered the demagogue politicians that destroyed America, and it is the ignorant and selfish people who had neglected to care enough about their fellow countrymen or the generations that were to follow. While many didn't care if our beloved Country was dying, they mostly had no concept that any sort of collapse would happen. These blissfully ignorant publicly-educated souls knew nothing of history or economics or even psychology for that matter. Nothing serious held their attention while they immersed themselves in their entertainment.

It should have become clear that the path we were on had been a total failure, but the denial continued. Dissenting voices were silenced by an intellectually dishonest news media, brainless celebrities, and lawless politicians who ignored the Constitution while they busied themselves in their vote buying schemes.

While this was going on, there appeared to be no redress in the courts from government tyranny. No remedies were possible within our land which was once the preeminent bastion of justice. The courts were being stacked up with political puppets who believed in a "living" constitution, which means a Constitution that flexes endlessly to support their theologically statist humanist worldview at every change point in social opinion, which was almost always to the left.

Our slide went unabated, since we had insufficient will to correct it. Far too many were satisfied with the status quo to vigorously defend our country rather than consider any unfairness toward any particular group.

History proved to anyone with eyes to see, that one of our biggest mistakes was removing prayer from school. When the last public school students who had mandatory prayer graduated, the trouble of the late 60's started, culminating into pervasive insane liberalism. Our Nation was founded on Christianity. Since removal of God from school, we steadily declined in overall decency, punctuated by outbreaks of horrific crimes.

One of the liberal answers to the confusion, they, the liberals created, was to get rid of guns. They all knew full well that taking guns out of the hands of innocent people would not solve the problem. Our response to those anti-God government worshipers and other agnostics demanding protection from *us* should have been to, "get over it."

Another big mistake was going off of the gold standard. Banning the right to own gold was another act of illegal liberal tyranny. That foolish action back in 1933 set the stage, and was the root cause for our inevitable financial ruin. As it is often said, "Do the math." Our money was on a one way path to becoming worthless from that point in 1933.

Phil knew that from his study of scripture that America had gone wrong at times violating God's will on "social issues". He also knew from his study was that God punishes sin, here and in the afterlife.

Another major blunder was not educating our populace that abortion was actually killing a person. We shouldn't have had to police parents not to kill their own children. A special divine punishment no doubt awaited America for this sin, and now America was perhaps living in the midst of the judgment of God.

Another curse from God was guaranteed when America abandoning Israel. The Bible clearly says not to do it, so it is no surprise that every country in the world hates Israel. The Nazis tried to kill them all, just like their Arab cousins have wanted to since Biblical times. What better proof is there that Israel is God's people than to have many others in the world try to wipe them out?

Other of American's biggest sins included; brutal treatment of indigenous people, slavery and bigotry, and stealing half of Mexico. These past transgressions could not have been ever been made totally right, and history corrected.

But those who were living were not its perpetrators. Those who wanted to come into the country legally and share the prosperity could do so. Modern day inhabitants only wanted to ignore race altogether, but were not allowed to because of opportunistic professional race baiters and cowardly politicians. Now the country was reaping the harvest of the hucksters' sins.

One political party wanted a flood of illegal aliens to come in for cheap labor. The other political party wanted a flood of illegal aliens to come in to vote for them, and in turn were rewarded with free stuff out of the US Treasury. The end result was a broke country that had so many foreigners come in that the US turned from a united States into a fragile conglomerate empire of separate cultures and languages.

In any event, Phil believed our American way of life had ended, as all things do, albeit way too soon, and was not going to return. Phil was tired. So very tired. All he knew from where he stood, looking up at the Gadsden, was that he was born free and would die free.

Later that day, Chris Wilcox showed up with a squad of soldiers to be given Crawfordton's decision. He was brought to the front room of the House. Jayden and Phil joined him.

"Good afternoon Major Wilcox," Phil said.

"Good afternoon, King Phil. Actually, I'm a Colonel now," Wilcox said, pointing at his bird rank insignia.

Phil shook his hand. "Congratulations on your promotion. Coincidentally, I've made Mr. Phipps here a Colonel as well."

Jayden smiled and shook Wilcox's hand. "Congratulations, sir."

"Likewise, Colonel." Wilcox said, although he was becoming aware of the ease with which Phil passed out higher military ranks.

"Well then," Wilcox said, not wanting to be overly abrupt, "Have you reached a decision?"

"Yes we have," Phil said. "By a consensus vote, we have decided to unify with the Ohio Confederation."

"Great!" Wilcox said. "Now, you will still want to be the constable of this town, won't you?"

"I don't think so," Phil said.

"Oh? Why not?"

"This kind of changes things for me, I think. So it's time for me to retire from politics. . . or whatever you want to call it. I have promised Jayden. . .Colonel Jayden that he would be taking over. Well, at least of what is left to be taken over. So, anyways, he will be the Constable. He's practically doing it already anyhow."

Jayden chuckled. "That's quite a title. Colonel Phipps, Constable of Crawfordton. Thanks, your highness."

Phil nodded subtly. "Well Colonel Wilcox; you and. . . *that guy* probably have a lot to talk about." With that he shook both their hands and started to turn to leave.

Jayden clung onto his hand a couple of seconds with both hands before he would let go. Then he whispered into Phil's ear.

"Yea, go ahead," Phil said, then turned away seeking solitude.

Jayden turned to Colonel Wilcox. "I just wanted to get Phil's permission to have a short ceremony."

They went outside and Col. Wilcox ordered his men to gather around Phil's flagpole. "Constable, please assemble all men and women between the ages of 20 and 25 here. Also we are taking volunteers of all ages."

"Men *and* women?" Jayden was surprised. He realized his daughter was now included in the conscription group.

"That is correct. Anyone not in compliance will be shot. As Constable, you must understand that you will be held responsible for those not in compliance."

Jayden wondered what they were getting into. He also wondered how anyone's age could be confirmed. Then he quickly ordered the Guardsmen, some of whom would be pressed into OC service, to round up everyone who was in the correct age group. After the space of about two hours, and a couple of incidences where young people were nearly shot by Captain Miller, about 200 young people were assembled in Phil's yard.

The large force included Jayden and Ella's own daughter, Madison. Also Tim Crawford's son Wesley, who had his finger amputated during the last battle against the Latin Mafia. Also Privates Taylor and Mercer, the soldiers who wanted to shoot the young cannibal Angela were present.

The young and frail Guardsman Preston Martin was under the mandatory service age, but volunteered himself.

Col. Phipps moved next to Martin. He told him, "Martin, get out of here. I am losing too many men. We need you here son, okay?"

"Yes sir, I understand, sir," Martin said, excusing himself, proud that he was needed at home.

"Constable. . .Colonel, would you please get the recruits into formation?"

"Attennnnn. . .tion!"

Col. Wilcox reviewed the recruits. Although he was not choosy, he dismissed a few of those who were totally unfit. One candidate looked as if he was in the middle stages of a terminal illness. Another clearly had non-corrective problems walking. Another, Jayden explained, lacked the mental faculties to function on her own.

While all were at attention facing the flagpole, Phil Crawford walked to the flagpole and lowered the Gadsden flag. Then he raised the Ohio red, white and blue flag. The flag was a non-rectangular flag, more like a pennant, except that it has two points. All eyes were on their old State flag. Now it was the new National flag. Phil stood there for five seconds, then gave a snappy salute.

All those in formation quickly followed with a salute to the Ohio flag. Many onlookers saluted the flag of their new nation as well, but others were distraught over their loved ones being pressed into service. . .or else.

A clean cut fit and trim officer with the Confederation shouted instructions to the rank and file. "Tomorrow you will all assemble here with any weapons and ammunition you have. You will also carry as much food and water as possible. Bring any other useful provisions. You will march to the Third Division Headquarters some sixty miles away for training and assessment. Then you will be assigned as the

Chairman of Ohio sees fit. Anyone found trying to desert will be shot on sight. That is all."

Chapter 13

May, One Year After the Collapse

Near Ohio-Indiana State Line

The car's GPS system no longer dispensed navigation information. They might actually be in Indiana, not Ohio. The LM Generalissimo wanted to find a secluded farm. They were on the back roads looking for someplace that was previously overlooked by other marauders, thus still had an abundance to steal. The entire gang drove by a farm. The farmhouse sit atop a ridge overlooking a small creek. The creek ran through a four-foot diameter culvert under the road. The barn, outbuildings and silos were behind the house.

The wooded hill was not the typical terrain for the area. The large trees on the property were getting buds on them. It was a pleasant setting and looked as if it have been undisturbed so far. Perfect for their purposes.

"Go on up there and see who is there," Mo told La Rata, one of his hood chiefs.

La Rata, or the rat, was so named because he was short, pudgy, had a hunched back, an overbite, a big nose, droopy dark eyes, and was hairy all over. Rata was slow and weak. He was not known for any special fighting or thieving abilities, but he was good at getting along with everyone, making him a suitable diplomat for the LM. La Rata looked back at Mo hoping for a different instruction. There was plenty of reason to expect a gun battle no matter how outnumbered the LM had their victims.

Rata was renowned for often performing Gang tasks without carrying a weapon. He approached the front door of the farmhouse and gave it a polite little knock. He waited five seconds and returned to the car. "There's no one home."

Mo was agitated. "You think you could spend more than two seconds and knock again? If no one is there, then go on in."

Rata returned to the porch and knocked a little harder this time. "Anyone at home? Hello?" He backed up and tried to ram the door down with his slumped profile. The attempt resulted in Rata bouncing off of the rattling door.

"Marcos!" Mo called upon another hood chief.

Marcos walked up to the door with his AK-47. He tapped the lower right hand side of the glass on the door with the rifle butt stock, breaking a fist-sized hole in the corner. He reached inside the door and played with the lock a few seconds without looking at it and opened the door.

"I could have done that," Rata said.

"Why didn't you then?" Marcos asked.

"Why break a good piece of glass?" Rata's eyes always looked half open, adding smugness to his response.

Marcos motioned for Rata to go in first.

Rata shook his finger at Marcos. "No thank you."

"Hey!" Mo was yelling from the lead car.

Marcos slowly moved inside the first room of the house which was the kitchen. Marcos tried to look everywhere, followed at a distance by Rata. They went room to room and checked everywhere on the first floor. There was a slightly lit stairway going upstairs and a very dark stairway leading to the cellar nearby.

"I'll go down and you go up," Rata suggested.

"Okay. . .No! . . .Okay, I go up and you go down," Marcos said.

"It almost worked," Rata said, dreading going down into a dark cellar. But if the cellar wasn't checked before declaring it was clear, there would be hell to pay. Rata pulled out his cell phone that no longer worked as a cell phone, but he kept it charged up as a flashlight.

Rata took about ten seconds per step to descend into the cellar. He slowly made his way into the dark room. Old canning jars covered with cobwebs were everywhere. Some other old junk was piled around the room.

"Don't shoot!" a woman screamed from the corner.

"Sonofa. . .Yea, I probably won't shoot you," Rata said, knowing he was unarmed. "But you better come upstairs where we can get to know each other a little better."

"Damn it Debbie!" a man said. "I'm putting down my shotgun," he announced to Rata.

She squawked back, "Well you would have gotten us all killed, I just know it."

"And that would be so bad?" the man rebutted.

Rata saw them coming out with their hands up. They looked like a husband and wife with a thirtyish daughter. The three were well fed but not overweight. Seeing the healthy people was an indication that there might be a decent food source here, at least

for three people, or a lot of people for one meal. He let them go up and he went back and picked up the shotgun. "Marcos!" Rata shouted up the stairs.

Marcos came all the way downstairs and led them to the kitchen. "Anyone else here?" he asked the man.

"Nope."

"Look!" Debbie said. "He had no gun! Earl, you are so stupid. Let us go now, please," She begged to Marcos.

Earl said, "No, just let me and Jackie go. You can have that 'ol cast iron bitch."

Debbie said, "Shut up Earl, you stupid idiot!"

While holding the shotgun, Rata waved from the front door for the leadership to come in.

As they were getting out of the car they looked at each other, noticing that Rata had a weapon.

They got inside and closed the door. Wind whistled through the hole Marcos punched in the glass.

Mo asked Rata, "Who captured these people, you?"

"Me."

Mo quickly forgot about Rata's achievement when he noticed Jackie's fine athletic form. He said, "Ohhhh, man! Look at this mamma here." He ran his hand through her spiky black hair.

Jackie pulled back her head back defiantly.

Mo's smile turned to a frown. He said, "Too bad she has to die now. Go ahead, Marcos, take them out back."

"Why?" Carlos objected. "Why kill them? They can help us. There is no need for it." Carlos could no longer contain himself. "I don't see why you always want to kill everyone."

"I don't need to explain to you!" Mo's face had contempt written all over it. "I have done my best to make sure you get food into your big fat stupid mouth of yours. Now I'm getting tired of your mouth! You are no longer an Enforcer! Marcos! You are the new Enforcer!"

"*Si, Señor!*" Marcos said.

Carlos, a much bigger man, became puffed up with rage, preparing for a fight. Red was showing through his heavily tattooed neck and light beard. "Mo, we are not going to be able to keep this up."

"What?! Are you still trying to get me mad?!" Mo asked.

Carlos said. "You heard me! All you have done is run off members, like when you told everyone to keep their old ladies and kids at home. Then you take us out to fight those nobodies and get half of our gang wasted! You won't get past thinking about killing everyone because of Juanito! We *all* have lost people. You don't know what you are doing! It has to stop!"

"Shoot him Marcos!" Mo ordered.

Marcos did not move. He and the other LM members were feeling Carlos' pain. The situation had become a full blown mutiny.

"What?!" Mo said. "Marcos! You can't even follow your first order as an Enforcer?!"

Carlos continued, "You told those people from that whole Delburg town that you would wipe them out if they didn't give us food. That was really stupid. What if they all gang up and kick our ass? Even Antonio said we better change it all."

Antonio shrugged his shoulders trying to minimize his involvement.

Carlos pleaded one last time, "How can you like, hate everyone? Look at this, if this is all we have to live for, then why live?"

Mo looked at Marcos and commanded again, "I said waste him!"

Marcos shook his head, pointing the barrel of the AK toward the floor.

"What?! You idiots think I am just having a bad hair day?! Fine!" Mo said, "I'll do it myself! The painful way." He pulled an item out of his pocket and with the snap of his wrist the butterfly knife's blade was displayed.

Carlos held up both hands and said, "Hey man, c'mon, we are brothers."

"No way you snake! You are dead to me! You hear me?!"

Carlos knew he was a dead man. This was the same venom he heard when Mo made the proclamation to get revenge for Juanito and many times before. This had to be resolved right now if he had any chance of survival. He picked up the side of the kitchen table as if the entire table was the size of a cutting board and charged into Mo, using the table as a shield, thrusting into Mo with immense impact into the front door. The front door broke off of its hinges and fell flat on the porch, sending Mo sliding across the porch into shattered glass and tumbling down the concrete stairs head first. Carlos forced the table through the doorway snapping off two of its legs. Then bounced it down the steps off of Mo again.

"I could have done that," Rata said.

Everyone heard the crash and came outside to get a look at the fight.

Mo laid at the bottom of the steps to the porch. He pivoted on his side and pulled out his .45 pistol, aiming it directly at Carlos.

B-BLAM! Rata unloaded both barrels of the shotgun into Mo.

They all stared at the mess who was formerly their Generalissimo. Then they stared at La Rata.

Rata's eyes were shifting side to side like a pinball. He asked, "Anyone got a problem with that?"

Antonio said, "Hey stupid, you just shot El Presidente. He wasn't perfect but he was still the boss. You think everything is cool now? I don't think so." Antonio pulled his large pearl-handled chrome revolver out.

Debbie ran and jumped on Antonio, sending him to the floor of the porch.

Earl yelled, "Jackie! Run!"

Jackie, Carlos, and Rata ran into the house. Earl turned to run into the house with them but a couple of gangsters blasted him in the back. Earl fell dead in the doorway.

Debbie got a hold of Antonio's ear with her teeth and was biting it off. Antonio was flailing and screaming. She punched him in the face and started going for his neck.

Marcos was trying to get Debbie off of Antonio. Finally he put a knife into her back. She screamed, and turned the pain she was feeling into more rage. She took this rage out on Antonio neck. Antonio was screaming at a pitch they thought was not possible for him.

Marcos stabbed Debbie in the back several times until she ceased.

Gangsters went up the steps of the porch to help Antonio, who was drenched in blood.

Jackie ran out the back door. Carlos and Rata followed. The screen door slammed behind them.

Antonio was clutching the side of his head, "Damn stupid bitch! Go get them! Kill them!"

The three being pursued ran full speed behind a corn bin for cover, then ran back to a large barn. The path chosen by Jackie kept even the slowpoke Rata out of the line of sight of the LM.

Marcos commanded his hood, "Move! Spread out and get them!"

Bangers fanned out trying to cover all possible escape routes.

Carlos ran headlong into a heavy patch of brambles behind the barn. It seemed like Rata was cussing and stopping on every thorn.

"Will you hurry up?!" Jackie exhorted in a hushed tone.

"Hey, running is not my thing."

"Look. Across the road there is a woods, then behind the woods is a road."

"Okay. I'll pick you up over there." With that, Rata started making his way toward the other way.

"Huh?!"

Carlos waved for Jackie to hurry up. "What's his deal? Is he smart or stupid."

"None of us can figure that out. Let's go!"

"Wait," Jackie said, looking face to face. "Thank you."

"Yea. Okay. Let's go. We ain't got time to kiss or nothing." Then he took off running.

"I wasn't going to," she said as she ran behind him.

"Yea you were," Carlos said in the running argument.

"No I wasn't"

It was a mad dash across the field toward the woods. One of the bangers spotted them running. He would have never have had the opportunity to attempt a shot at that range in Detroit. They runners heard the shots behind them and zigzagged a bit to become more difficult targets.

Once they reached the woods they turned to look and saw no one was following them.

Jackie turned and pressed her lips with Carlos's. She offered the kiss with feeling, with gratitude and exhilaration to be alive, but was thinking of her parents.

Carlos said, "You know your Mom is a hell of a woman. So is your Dad, I mean a good man."

She hung her head. "They're probably dead, right?"

"Sorry." Carlos said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "You did what you had to. We can't ever go back there. Your Mom and Dad did everything they could to make sure you got away. So you have to make the most of it."

"Come on," Jackie said. Let's go back to through the woods. There's a road over there.

They went through the woodlot that was full of old undisturbed fallen trees and sticks.

Carlos had no experience negotiating that kind of terrain before, so he was slow, but they came to the edge of the woods.

"Oh hell no!" Carlos said, "Were like really screwed."

"What?"

"That's Mo's Escalade sitting there on the road." Then he saw La Rata come out of the driver's side.

"It's about time," Rata said. "I told you I was going to pick you up. Next time don't monkey around so much."

"How. . .", Jackie was at a loss.

Jackie got into the back of the Escalade and Carlos was in the front passenger side. Rata stepped on it.

Rata explained, "I'm not really a running kind of person. I like riding, so I doubled back quietly and went through the creek. Then I snuck under the big pipe under the road and come up on the other side. Then I walked up and hopped in Mo's Escalade while everyone was looking the other way for you. This car is pretty nice, but I guess I got it pretty dirty inside with my muddy shoes and all."

Jackie told Rata, "Thanks for saving me, funny guy."

Rata looked at her in the rear view mirror. "Funny? . . . What? No. I'm badass."

"To the max, Bro. You saved me too, Thank you," Carlos said.

Chapter 14

It was planting time and even though Phil was trying not to worry about everyone else, he had reason for some concerns. This year and every year thereafter was going to be a lot more work. Weeds would get started and could ruin the crop yield. A consolation might be if the weeds were mostly of an edible variety, but typically not.

There was no reason to assume that the weather would cooperate. But if it didn't because of too much rain, planting by hand had the advantage of being able to get out and slog into a wetter field and not have to worry about a tractor getting stuck.

The bulk of the seeds that Phil and Tim Crawford advised everyone collect from the large fields were from hybrid plants. Planting hybrids is done by modern agriculture because hybrid plants are more vigorous. However, they knew that the next generation of plants randomly selected might be a wonky mongrel crop that has a horrible yield. So every season from now on, a seed selection process must be done each year to improve non-hybrid cultivars.

The fear would be what to do if there ends up being a large food gap between next December and May of the following year. But who knows what the time span between now and then could bring? Phil might as well work on his own gardening and help Amy out with some school teaching, rather than help ingrates. Kids always seem to take to Phil, even though he didn't think he ever did anything to encourage it. One of Phil's sayings was, "Someone has to live." He said this often when speaking about survival, with the youth always in mind.

Captain Miller was summoned by a Guardsman when they saw a black Escalade parked at the "Sniper at Work" sign by the north observation post. Three people were leaning on the front of it. One of them was holding up a white flag of truce.

"Let's get Elijah before we head down there," Henry Miller said to Angel. "Keep your eye on them, I'll go get E."

Henry brought Elijah back to the OP.

"LM is coming here?!" Elijah asked. "What, they want to borrow a cup of sugar?"

"Let's find out," Henry said.

"Yea, *lets*," Elijah said. They started walking towards the observation post. "You know, they are not as hard to read as you guys make it. I'm thinking you could do this on your own. We got stuff, they want stuff. They try to take stuff, we stop them. It's not quantum mechanics."

Henry said, "You're an expert E. Kind of a cranky one though. Anyway, I talked to Jayden about your tax status. He said you won't have to pay it because you are always helping us out. You are a *de facto* member of the military."

Elijah said, "That was great of you to draft me into the Guard, even though I told you a few thousand times I didn't want nothin' to do with it."

"Hey, no problem."

"Whoa!" Elijah said when he immediately recognized Mo's Escalade. "This is a high level meeting, huh?"

Carlos told Rata, "Really? You're holding your underwear up on a stick?"

"Hey!" Rata said. "It's the only white I got. At least my underwear is white. If we used yours the snipers would be trying to get a little closer right now."

"We could use mine," Jackie said.

"Yea, okay. You look like your pants are spray painted on. I'm pretty sure you don't wear any underwear," Rata said.

"I got underwear. You're the Commando."

"Carlos, what color are they; leopard?"

Jackie said, "Why don't you mind your own business."

Rata told her, "Hey, my eyes are up here."

Carlos shook his head. "Just keep awake here. This place is like no joke, for real. Hey! I think that black guy is one of the Detroit cops Mo was looking for."

Captain Miller, Lieutenant Angel Howard and Privates Brian Keller and Randy Nolan cautiously spread out and approached the vehicle with their rifles trained on suspected LM targets. Elijah casually walked up not even drawing his pistol.

"Don't move because I would love to shoot," Henry said. "What can we do for you?"

Rata said, "We just want to talk."

Elijah said, "Let's see, who do we have here?" He looked them over, "Carlos Gutierrez. . .Some groupie or something, and you. . . Can't really place you."

Rata put down his underwear. "What the hell?. . . Wait. Let me turn to the side a little. Now you know, right?"

"Not placing you. . . Oh yea, you're a minor thug. . .Were you some sort of hood chief lackey?"

"That's very insulting," Rata said with a frown. We're not from the Lat. .
.Liberation. . .uh."

"Militia," Carlos said.

"Yea," Rata said. "We are not from the Liberation Militia."

"I know who you are," Henry said. "Now what do you want?"

Rata paused and said, "Um. . . I only want to tell you we don't want to be enemies with you no more. We got away from them. We quit."

Henry said. "Why should we trust you?"

Rata said, "They are under new management. . .well anyways the old management is dead."

Henry was surprised. "Mo is dead?"

"Yea, I shot him," Rata said.

"I still don't trust you," Henry said, then turned to Jackie. "You; are you a hostage?"

"No. I'm not."

Elijah asked, "Are you stupid?"

"Uh. . .no. He did shoot that Mo guy like he said. Mo was going to have me killed and Carlos and La Ratoguy saved my life."

Carlos spoke up. "Things are different. We just wanted to tell you we are not part of them. We want to stay here, okay?"

Henry said, "Definitely not okay."

Rata said, "We just thought we would ask, okay? Honestly, I'm getting a little sick of your attitude."

"My attitude!?"

Elijah said, "Yea. Your sorry selves can stay."

Henry looked at Elijah, then he looked at Carlos. "No! What?!" Then he said out of the side of his mouth, "You know they are spies, right?"

Elijah asked the fugitives, "Do you fools even have any guns?"

"Hey, you talking to me?" Rata said.

"You seein' any other fools here?" Elijah said.

Rata said, "Not really."

Carlos said, "Yea, I got a gun in the car, but I only have 10 bullets."

Rata looked at Carlos, "So why didn't you shoot at them?" He looked at Henry. ". . .No! Not at you guys. . . I mean at the LM. Damn."

Carlos answered Rata, "Really? I'm supposed to, like help you with my 10 bullets so you can get your slow ass away while 30 guys shoot at me. You are pissing me off."

"Okay," Henry said to Elijah. "I see what you mean." He ceased pointing his rifle at them. "Stand down."

Elijah said to Henry, "Well. . .Yea. Would you send a spy over to surrender with a big underwear flag?"

"Hey, hey hey! Rata said, "My underwear is not that big.

Henry said to the fugitives. "If anything happens to anyone around here, I am coming for you first. Now park that car somewhere. That is your new home."

Angel said, "Tomorrow, I will try to hook you people up with some jobs."

"That would be good," Elijah said. "They need to stay busy. But first we want to interview them."

That next morning Henry tapped on a window of the Escalade. They were all sleeping. Rata unlocked it. Elijah got in the front passenger seat and Henry got in the back with Jackie and Carlos.

"How did you guys know how to find us here all the way from Detroit?" Elijah asked.

Rata responded, "You guys are cops ain't you? I can't believe you don't know."

Elijah said, "Let's just say for argument's sake we do know and we want to confirm that you know we know."

"Whatever man," Rata said. "The box the bazooka was in has a GPS thingy on the bottom of it. Like I said, we are not against you, so what's the difference?"

Elijah asked, "You say you shot Mo, so who's next in line to run the LM? La Chiva?"

"No man," Rata said. "Chiva got shot in that cemetery. Definitely Antonio."

Elijah asked, "What can you guys tell us about Antonio?"

Carlos said, "That dude is pretty smart, but he is not as mean as Mo. Mo thought it was easier just to kill everyone."

Rata added, "Antonio's kind of wimpy too man. Jackie's Mom took him down. But I have to say that Jackie's Mom is badass."

"I know they probably killed my parents," Jackie said.

"Sorry," Elijah said.

Jackie tried not to break down. "I know you think I'm stupid for being with these guys, but I don't care what anyone thinks. They saved my life. They are good guys."

Carlos put his arm around her.

"I'm sorry," Elijah said. "I understand now. You're not stupid."

The tears came forth.

"Me too," Henry said.

"We good?" Elijah asked.

She nodded yes.

Elijah asked Rata, "Why would a guy like you want to join a gang?"

"Hell, man. . . you're in a gang."

"I am?" Elijah asked.

"Yea, man. You joined this gang you are in here because of the Latin Mafia and other people like that. That is why I joined the Latin Mafia. I got tired of getting my ass kicked for fun by other gangs. So I got *jumped in*, that way I could get protection."

"Jumping in" is an initiation that involves the prospective member getting jumped, or beaten by members for a given period of time. The inductee is not permitted to hit back or cover up beyond certain ground rules. "Not all of the people are here because they think the same way about things that you do. They are here for the protection, or a job."

"We aren't a Gang like the Mafia. We don't sell drugs here," Henry said.

Rata said, "No, but you are fighting against the system."

"Why didn't you go to the Police for protection?" Henry asked.

Rata looked at Elijah, "How stupid is he?"

"On a scale of one to ten? Maybe about a six," Elijah said.

Rata said, "It would be a different story if we would have been allowed to carry guns in Detroit. If I was being taken out by a gang, this macho body of mine would be cold before any cops would show."

"That's at least half false," Henry said.

"No man, the Police are really slow," Rata said.

The questioning continued as the polarization between the sides gradually softened. The interview lasted for about two hours, going into great detail about all of the weapons that the LM had, how many people. The names of the current leaders and what they were like.

Afterwards, Elijah and Henry compared notes about what they had taken away from the interview as they walked to the House to report to Jayden with their findings.

"It looks to be factual," Henry said.

"Yea, for sure," Elijah said. "And the facts are, the LM has a lot fewer members, but they have superior firepower and possibly an improved leadership, at least in some ways. The motivation for them to come after us is diminished with Antonio versus Mo; although they might still hold a grudge against Rata and Carlos. Even though the LM are just inside Indiana they are not far enough away to be out of the picture."

Henry said, "I was hoping Ratman and Carlos were young enough so they would have to go into the Confederation Army, but they aren't. I can't help it. I just don't trust them. I probably never will."

"What do you expect, you're a cop. Its self-preservation," Elijah said.

"No, it's more than just that. I think people like that, even if they want to change, they don't know how to. They can't know unless they have God."

Elijah stopped, "Where did that deep thought come from?" Elijah knew Henry for so many years, but had never heard that kind of a comment from him.

"I. . .Uh. I guess I even surprised myself," Henry said.

Elijah said, "I'm not criticizing, just surprised. It's like, wisdom or something."

Chapter 15

July, Crawfordton

Farmers who had any gas left over in their farm gas tanks had to weigh using the almost prohibitive value of that gas against the probable future food commodity prices. If they did raise crops, could they market them at a profit? It almost made no sense to plant in the modern way with gas being so expensive, even if they did have seed to plant. So much of the greatly diminished planting was done in an iron age sort of way. Simply by the power of the human back pulling a hoe.

So because of all of the planting hurdles to overcome, the crops were sparse and only a tiny percentage of the land got planted. Now it was obvious that the next harvest would be a disastrous one.

The lack of grains, and the terrible prospect of a good grain yield in the future made the raising of animals for meat not worthwhile. Livestock was slaughtered. The breeding pairs of livestock were also slaughtered for consumption, including valuable sires, some of which used to be worth tens of thousands apiece of the old dollars.

The awareness of the coming food supply problems was pervasive. So chatter throughout Crawfordton was generally worrisome. Things could be far worse than when the collapse first hit.

But Elijah was excited when Aliyah told him that Crawfordton now had a post office. He could write a letter to Rene. Who knows, maybe she would get it and write back?

The new post office was a clear departure from what he had envisioned. The new Post Office was in a white van in the middle of the road.

The tailgate of the van was lifted up and an attendant sat in the back. He was a younger man who was missing most of his left leg. A single crutch leaned up against the van beside him. On his other side, a hefty semi-auto pistol was laying out in the open.

In front of him was a small folding table with pens on it, and containers of salt. Hanging from the raised gate was a hand written sign: "Ohio Confederation Post Office. Letters Mailed - Five Cents."

Elijah said, "Excuse me, I'd like to mail a letter."

The Postal Clerk said, "Okay, do you have it written?"

"Not yet."

"Well, for five cents you can have two sheets of paper to write on, and you can send it anywhere in the Confederation, and some other adjacent areas in the Postal Union. There's a map on the table there."

Elijah asked, "Well, what about Cincinnati?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe. But I can't guarantee. . ."

"No, that's okay. I'll take my chances. I just need one sheet of paper, please."

"Okay, then."

Elijah was writing on the table." *Rene, I hope you are okay. We are living in Crawfordton, Ohio just east of Delburg in Armistead County. Your mother is the Doctor here and I am a farm hand. It would be better if you moved here. You can get here by going north on I-75. We look forward to getting a letter from you. All our love, Dad.*

Elijah intentionally left out the part about being on retainer as a soldier. He folded the paper and put Rene and Matt's last known address. He handed the paper to the Clerk.

"That'll be five cents, and you can't pay in US nickels."

Elijah had a blank look on his face.

The Clerk said, "Yea, I know, it's weird. Of course a nickel is not worth five cents in silver. So. . ." the Postal Clerk sighed, "what you have to do is either give me a quarter, in which case your change will be two dimes, or give me three dimes, in which case your change will be a quarter."

"Oh, yea. Hey I got a quarter."

"Fine you're good then. Here's your two dimes change."

"Great, thanks a lot. Oh. . .how long does the letter take to get there, that is , if they can find her."

"It shouldn't take more than a few weeks."

"A few weeks?"

"Yea. The mail will get picked up here by bicycle on Wednesdays. It has to go by bicycle to the capital, then it gets sorted. Then it goes by bicycle all the way as far

south as the route will take it. Don't worry, they won't throw it away if she doesn't pick it up right away. It seems like everybody is looking for somebody."

"What day is it today?"

"It's Monday, actually, so you're good."

"Oh, good." Elijah thought that mailing a letter to Rene sounded about hopeless, but the hope he got from handing the old yellow paper over to the Clerk was well worth the five cents. "What's the deal with the salt?"

A lot of people don't have salt. If you don't have salt, you die. So the Chairman wants to sell salt in the Post Offices.

"Maybe I better get some then. Here's a dime."

"Okay."

Later that day Elijah was out in the field with Aliyah. His Crawfordton Guard involvement was starting to take away from his farm hand income. This time of year the workers were getting paid by the day. Typically about a quarter per day for farm work, which was near the bottom of the pay scale. If They worked harder, it was usually recognized with more pay. Static loitering would bring a cut in pay and severing ties. No one argued much about pay, because they could easily go to another farm on a day to day basis.

Aliyah made multiple times more as a doctor, but was not busy at the Clinic all of the time. Sometimes she liked to work outdoors with Elijah. They preferred to work away from everyone else, but had no problem working alongside others if they wandered by. They were hoeing and tugging at weeds among the unimpressive young soybean seedlings. It was starting to warm up, but it was not yet at the full heat of the day.

Elijah said, "You know, I think Phil had the right idea."

"Oh?" Aliyah said.

"Yea. He helped everyone out, then he left the heavy lifting to somebody else."

"I don't think that was so great. He tells people he doesn't like them, then he quits being the leader over people who named the town after him."

"Yep. He's my hero. They more or less voted him out of office, so he said fuggedaboutit."

"He's just a bitter old man. He's angry at everyone."

"He should be! He sticks his neck out for people who would just as well kill him and take all his stuff, then they basically vote him out!"

"Hmmm. . .sounds like you and Phil are of the same mind."

"Darn straight!"

"Okay Baby. So does that mean the next time Henry shows up wanting my hero to do something crazy, you tell him you are going to tell him to buzz off?"

Elijah started taking out his frustrations on the weeds for a few moments. Then he said, "I doubt it."

"Now pray tell, why is that?"

After another long silence but less vigorous hoeing, he stopped. "I don't know."

"You know I won't be able to go on if something happened to you. I have went through all these years while you were in Iraq, then the force, and now you run off at the first chance you get with Henry again. A lot of these gray hairs I got have your name on them."

Elijah felt like a bad husband right then. Aliyah was not a complainer. She had seldom said much in the past. All she would say is "Somebody has to do the difficult thing and that somebody is my husband."

They kept pulling the weeds. The pile on the wheelbarrow was becoming overloaded.

Elijah asked, "Would it be wrong or bad if I went to look for Rene and Matt?" As soon as he asked it, he figured his timing was all wrong.

"I don't know," Aliyah said. She thought about it awhile. "I don't like it, but you will have to decide. It seems like, well. . .It's a long walk down there. Let's take this load out."

Henry knew that Elijah would be home during the hottest part of the day while Aliyah was at the office. He came in and told him, "E, you gotta come over to the headquarters for a briefing."

Elijah sat there motionless, looking at the ceiling.

Henry asked, "What?"

"Oh, I'm just trying to analyze myself. What is it that makes me say 'yes' to doing all of this crap with you? You know what the answer is?"

"I really don't."

"The answer is. . . I don't know why I should ever do it. Why do you do it, Henry?"

"What's with all of the philosophy? I dunno, I guess I have to be somewhere, doing something."

"Deep. Are you doing ganja or something?"

"I'll see you over there."

"I don't think so."

"Yea, okay. Whatever you say."

"No, I mean it. Quit telling me to do this crap."

Henry said, "You know E, you blame me for all of this stuff. I'm just the messenger. Phil is the one who always wants you over there. I always tell him you are ouchy about it all the time and we don't need you."

"Phil wants me over there?"

"Yea, Phil."

"Is Phil going to be there?"

"Well yea, he lives there you know. I suppose if *he* wants you over there, then it's different," Henry said with a scowl.

"Yea, pretty much."

"I liked it better when you were the one who was mad."

Elijah chuckled. "Yea, but you are still getting me over there, you dang jerk."

"I guess I am, ain't I?" Henry said, relaxing his scowl.

Chapter 16

Crawford's House, Crawfordton

Elijah arrived at the Crawfords's House in the late afternoon. The fortifications around the House were admirable. Sand bags were piled around the house up to the bottom of the windows. Interconnected trenches and foxholes were everywhere. There were concentric circles of barbed wire to further slow down any attackers. There was a small citadel at the south side of the house made from stacked up garbage cans filled with dirt. Elijah recalled the incidents of the spider holes and pits with stakes in them. He wondered what other little surprises were also built into the defenses.

Security seemed heightened as there were double the amount of Guardsmen from what was usual.

The inside of the House was roomy, but not as big as its reputation. It was just a regular house. Amy met him at the door and led him to the formal dining room. It was pretty plain as far as formal dining rooms go, but it had a big dining table. The sunlight bathed the room during that time of day.

"Elijah, you come sit here next to Phil and Henry," Amy said.

"Thank you Amy."

Also, Colonel Chris Wilcox of the Ohio Confederation Army was there, along with Constable Jayden Phipps. They all greeted Elijah.

Phil told Wilcox, "Elijah here is a great guy to have around. He knows how to read an enemy."

Col. Wilcox said, "That will come in real handy today, Elijah."

Elijah said, "You guys are very complimentary, but give me too much credit."

Phil said, "We all have to pull together here. We appreciate everything you men do."

Jayden said, "Colonel, I think everyone we want to be here are present."

Wilcox said, "Fine. First, I just want to let everyone know that Delburg has not united with the Confederation yet. We have picked up some more areas to expand the OC, but not Delburg."

Amy popped in with some beverages on a tray and was serving them.

"Hey!" Wilcox said. "These glasses have ice in them!"

Amy said, "Yea, Phil buried a bunch of ice last winter. There was still just a bit left over."

Wilcox said, "That is neat."

Amy said, "The drink is just some watered down grape juice. It's not very sweet."

"That's great, Amy," Wilcox said, taking a big gulp. "Oooh. . . a bit tart. Anyway, as I was about to say, we have been monitoring UN propaganda. The UN is assisting Homeland Security, or specifically, the FPS, which is the Federal Protective Services. Their stated goals are first, to penetrate from the east into the corn belt, which we are on the outer edge of, to get crop production up for export next year. So that means they are coming here."

They all looked at each other at the potentially ominous news.

"Secondly, they want to use private contractors. Of those identified, the ones around here that are of concern include the Goldfinch Coalition, and the Liberation Militia."

"What!?" They almost all said together. "Liberation Militia?!"

Wilcox said, "Yes. They are using these private contractors to go house to house confiscating weapons. No doubt they are stealing and committing all sorts of atrocities along the way."

Phil said, "Those filthy bastards! Just let them come here thinking they will take anything!"

Amy hollered from two rooms away, "Phil, is there a problem?"

"No honey," he said in a calm tone. Clearly Amy did not appreciate Phil's vernacular.

"Yes," Wilcox said. "They mentioned the Liberation Militia by name. Now I know you people have had some run-ins with them."

"Run-ins?" Phil asked.

"No," the Colonel said. "I don't want to marginalize your struggle with them. However the point I was making is that you know them. Also, I would like to know what you know of the Goldfinch Coalition."

They all looked at each other.

Henry said, "Nothing, I guess. That sounds pretty cryptic. What are they, a multinational spy organization?"

"No, not really," Wilcox said. "They are a grocery store chain."

"Huh?" Elijah said. "I gotta ask, why would anyone fear a grocery store?"

"Yea, I know, Wilcox said. They are over in Ottawa, Indiana, that's about all I know."

"That's only about a dozen miles away," Phil said.

"Yes," Wilcox said. "So you can see that you are in a strategic location here."

"Is that what you call it?" Jayden asked rhetorically.

Amy came into the room with a platter. It had bite sized chunks of white meat on it. To the side were some small bowls of sauce to dip them in. Amy pointed at the bowls, "You have barbeque here, or soy sauce."

Wilcox said, "Amy, how nice. What do you call it."

"Burket's Market calls it 'snake'," she said.

Henry took a bite and said, "It's kind of chicken-ish, but a little tougher texture. Not bad, really."

Elijah tried it. He said, "It will work. Thanks Amy." He thought to himself. . . hey wait a minute. That Amy served a watered-down beverage and snake. Were these items meant to have some kind of a reference for Wilcox's benefit? That Amy was really something. He looked at Phil. He might have had a knowing look of some kind on his face. . . unless this was all his imagination. He looked at Wilcox. Did he look a little messed up because he was eating snake, or because he was being put down? Oh well, more for me.

Amy's subtle charms reminded Elijah that he was always surprised at the hidden talents people had. You can't underestimate people. He thought of La Rata. Some people are way smarter than anyone gives them credit.

"Thanks so much Amy," Wilcox said with a smile that looked a little forced.

"I made it special just for you," she said.

There it is again! Elijah thought. Too many correlations. That Amy is wicked smart. She's doing this stuff to make Phil feel better.

"Elijah! Hello?" Jayden said.

"Huh? Oh sorry," he said, "I was just enjoying this meal so much."

The Colonel wants to know if you will go over to Ottawa and investigate Goldfinch," Jayden said.

"Ummm. . .Okay," Elijah said. "But I will need a couple of team members."

Jayden asked, "Who?"

Elijah said without thinking, "How about La Rata?"

"Huh?" Henry said.

"Oh yea," Elijah said, "and Captain Henry Miller. He is definitely the man for the job and there is no way I can go without him."

They met eyes as if to say "gotcha".

Colonel Wilcox said, "My, sounds like you are highly recommended there, Captain Miller."

Henry said, "Well, I don't know if I am available."

"You are now," Jayden said. Then he asked Elijah, "Do you really want this Rata guy? He reminds me of Kevin and Todd from your driveway."

Elijah said, "La Rata was savvy enough to kill Mo with the entire LM there and take his car, and still keep his underwear white. Best of all he looks like he is as dumb as a doorknob."

"Underwear?" Jayden asked. "I don't even want to know, we're trying to eat here."

Phil started laughing. "I was just trying to get past the doorknob thing."

"All right," Wilcox said. "You guys work that out with your superspy. I just want to cover a couple of more topics. This FPS and UN movement is a big concern right now. But this area around here is an extra high level concern right now. We will not tolerate any FPS or their proxies coming in here to demand anything. They are not a legitimate government. They are not over us. Therefore we would like to set up a post near here."

Phil was all perked up, "You want to put an army base here?"

"Well, yes. A small one starting out," the Colonel said. But also we want you to set up a network of area groups to help each other in the time of need. I cannot stress enough that you must be ready for trouble."

"That's good enough warning for me, Colonel," Jayden said.

Amy came into the room. Elijah wondered what the next insulting food course would be.

"Phil," She said, "Sophia Thomas is at the door. She was complaining about Liam's school teacher; meaning you; who helped him write something inappropriate. She was mad when Liam brought home a paper that said, "I want to be a soldier, I will kill."

Phil looked disgusted. "He wrote that very well. That is the focus. Not the content. Those are his words, not mine."

"Well, you want to talk to her then?"

"No."

"Okay," Amy said, "I'll tell her she has to exercise her tyranny over free speech in her own home, or something like that."

"Fine."

Wilcox continued, "There is an unusual group that is not too far from here, called the 119th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. We can bring them in within a half day's notice. But I have another question for you here. Phil, I want you to consider selling your house to the OC Army."

Phil looked uncharacteristically cornered. "I never thought about doing that."

Amy came into the room. "Sorry you guys, but some Jones lady is here and wants to talk to Jayden about a poacher she shot in her garden last night."

Jayden said, "Can she wait until the meeting is over?"

"She just wanted to report it."

"Can you write down the facts and tell her I said to be careful about shooting poachers?"

"Sure Jayden."

Elijah had no idea that the House was such a crisis center. At least when he was in the Precinct in Detroit he would get to go home at the end of the day. It must be horrible living here. It was crowded with Phil's friends and relatives. Plus that cannibal girl had to be causing tension somewhere within the house.

Wilcox said, "Going back to your house; You guys have turned this place into such a bastion of defense that I have to ask. We really need a place like this to headquarter our outpost. We'll pay you, and the town if need be."

"No one can buy the lives of my wife, family and friends," Phil said.

Wilcox countered, "But you could take the money and go wherever you want. You could get away from all of this. . .urban sprawl."

"Here's the thing," Phil said. "If you paid the kind of money I would have to get, you could hire people in town here to build you a fortress extraordinaire. There's a good supply of cheap timber and labor around here."

Colonel Wilcox looked at Phil. "Will you consent to be our fort construction consultant?"

"No problem. If I were you, I'd see if I could get that piece of higher ground up there by our old north observation post. We call it 'Dan's Hill'."

"Good. Let's start on all this at once. We intend to send a unit upon completion. Elijah and Captain Miller, be careful and bring us back a full report."

"Yes sir," Elijah said. "*We* will."

Chapter 17

Crawfordton

Elijah and Henry finally found Rata the following day. He was coming out of the house-turned-store Burket's Market. Rata was walking toward a repurposed armored car that had the original markings spray painted over. Elijah noted that Rata was not carrying a weapon.

Elijah could immediately tell by the situation Rata was working as a scavenger, the high priced kind, going into incredibly dangerous towns, finding abandoned artifacts for resale.

Elijah asked Rata, "What would you say about taking a little trip?"

"That's what I am doing already."

Henry said, "What about to Ottawa, Indiana?"

"I already am. Every day."

"You're lying!" Henry was agitated.

Rata was annoyed. "Dude, what is your problem? I told you that I already go there every day. You're not listening."

Elijah asked, "Where are you going in Ottawa?"

"Goldfinch," he said. "What about it?"

"They are no good," Henry said. "What are you up to there?"

Rata was in no hurry to explain himself. After a silence and staring Henry in the face, he said, "You guys are starting to piss me off. You want me to be an upstanding citizen, then you bitch like a little girl about what I do. There is nothing illegal about what I do." The undersized man-rodent put his finger into Henry's chest and said, "I'd like to see you do what I do every day. I'd probably pee my pants if I thought your little whiney ass could handle it."

"No," Elijah intervened, "You got it all wrong. We want to be your friend. We were just not thinking, okay? Right Henry? I agree with everything you said."

Henry said with a snarl, "Yea, I'm sorry, Rata. Let's start over, okay?"

"Okay, no problem. Damn. It takes a lot of money to buy gas for that damn pig truck over there. You know what gas costs right now? You guys have no idea about this job."

"Do you own that truck?" Henry asked.

"That thing cost me an Escalade that was full of canned food and an ounce of gold."

"Where did you get the food?" Henry asked.

"Man. Don't you listen? At Goldfinch. They got big-assed warehouses all over the place over there full of canned food. They got an army around that place. You don't want to screw around with them because they will definitely hurt you. I hate going over there. They can't take a joke."

"Where did you get the money to buy the canned foods?"

"I told them they could have sex with your mother if they gave me the food. What the hell? Are you hemorrhoids done being a pain in my ass yet?" Rata turned to go to his armored car.

Elijah called out to Rata, "Where's Carlos?"

"I don't know. It's not my turn to watch him. *Adios almorranas.*"

Henry said, "That goofy guy ain't right. He actually thinks he is so freaking tough."

"That guy is amazing," Elijah said.

"He's stupid!"

"You know, you really ought to quit pimping your mom out for *Spaghetti O's*."

"You're sick, E."

Elijah's laughter was the rubbing-in kind of laughter. "Hey! We finished our Goldfinch spy mission already!"

"Hey, yea, we did. Cool." I'll go report our findings.

"It just goes to show you what a superspy Rata is."

"That's dumb luck!"

Elijah became more involved in the intelligence side of the Crawfordton defense force. Each day he received a detailed report from Phil who took turns on the radio with Amy and Ella. Someone was monitoring the radio for hours every day and night. The radio was powered by a crank handle or its solar cell. It also had an AC adapter which was currently of no use.

On its shortwave radio station Homeland Security made no secret of its intentions. Reports of its progress west through Pennsylvania was no military secret. Personal interviews of those who welcomed the Federal Protective Services as heroes coming to restore civilization were broadcast. The station's programming sounded lop-sided and phony, never admitting they had any problems along the way.

There were also many positive blurbs on the station about the United Nations.

A typical message concerning the mission of the United Nations: *In addition to maintaining peace and security, peacekeepers are increasingly charged with assisting in political processes; reforming judicial systems; training law enforcement and police forces; disarming and reintegrating former combatants; supporting the return of internally displaced persons and refugees.*

Everyone knew that if the FPS and UN focused on weapon confiscation, then there certainly must be a more to the FPS story that was not told. Anyone surviving thus far certainly must be some kind of weapon owner. And the weapon owners know they are in the vast majority and need the weapons to defend themselves, including from those trying to take the weapons, however righteous their ignorant intentions may be.

Elijah also kept up with the progress of the fort. There was an army of woodcutters in the woods where the battle with the Latin Mafia had taken place. Trees were being felled and the branches had to be sawed off. Workers then cut saddle notches into some of the logs so they could be interlocked like a log cabin for the blockhouses. This phase was slow going as no one really seemed to have any experience doing it. All of the wood cutting work was treacherous but excellent progress on the fort was being made.

At Phil's suggestion Col. Wilcox hired some Amish workers from Indiana. The Amish had draft horses and all the riggings to haul logs from the woods to the construction site of the Fort on Dan's Hill. These Amish were not the old order Amish who were strict about Amish doctrine, including pacifism. The Amish had sentries who were well armed. It was ironic that the Amish were now the more technologically advanced culture in some ways.

Heavy logs were put in place by the Amish and diggers working together. Then the large team of diggers with their shovels were filling piles of clay soil between and behind the logs. The fortress was planned to be about an acre in size.

Phil told Elijah that Wilcox said the bill for the fort's construction would be staggering, but it would be the best fortress in the Confederation. The east facing stockade wall, vertical logs placed side by side would be the heaviest, as that is the most likely direction of an attack. Ten-foot tall mounds of dirt were being put behind the

logs, to prevent vehicles from ramming the stockade over. There were two blockhouses, one on each end, that were more like bunkers. The bunkers were large mounds of clay soil with chambers inside that could house defenders. These were to be large enough to house whatever weapons they could get their hands on.

In July during midday, people liked to take a break and sit outside in the shade. So there were a lot of eyes on the parade of visitors when they came riding in on horseback.

Wherever the long haired rider Ethan Mentzer from Delburg was around, he would gather everyone's attention. Ethan was with five other riders. All were armed and had heavy packs on their horses.

"I need to see Jayden," Ethan called out to a sentry on the driveway in front of the Crawford House.

"Wait for clearance," the sentry ordered.

"It's urgent," Ethan said.

After a few minutes Jayden came out of the front door. "What's up, Ethan?"

"I got news; Bad news."

"Come on in, then. Tell your friends to relax out here," Jayden said, turning to go back into the house. No order was given to take weapons from the riders.

Elijah heard the horses come into town and the brief exchange between Ethan and Jayden, so he followed Ethan into the House.

"Jayden met with Ethan in the foyer of the House. Henry came in from another room.

"There's stuff going on in Delburg," Ethan said. "Homeland Security has moved into town. The Mayor has pledged everyone's full cooperation. There have been shootings. The Chief of Police is dead. You, know, the short guy who was here the last time."

Phil came into the room. "What's going on?"

Ethan said, "There was fighting in Delburg. It is now a capital offense to own a gun there."

"Damn their pathetic asses all to hell!" Phil cursed.

"Is there a problem, Phil?" Amy said from another room.

"Hell yes!" Phil said. "I hoped this day would never come." Then Phil asked Ethan, "What do you mean, *was* fighting?"

"People are turning in their guns. They are going through everyone's house looking for guns."

"They're just handing them in, huh? Who's doing this?" Phil asked.

"Homeland Security, and their gang-looking thugs," Ethan said.

"I want everyone's advice here. Do we attack right now?" Jayden asked.

Elijah said, "I like hitting them before they are dug in."

Captain Henry Miller said, "They might send even more."

"They could send more if we don't attack," Elijah said.

Henry said, "We should wait until everyone is here."

Ethan said, "The sooner we get help the fewer of us who will die. I for one, am not living under Homeland Security tyranny. I'm not interested in trading freedom for peace. Especially at this stage in the game."

Phil said, "Its real simple. They need taught a lesson. If we wait, we may not be able to demonstrate the need for our allies to join in. If they know we are already engaged in the fight, then they will come. Including our Ohio Confederation. I hope."

"Henry!" Jayden said. "Sound the alarm and rally the troops. This is a full alert. We need to bring in any and all reinforcements that we can muster. Be aware that we will likely be going up against a superior force."

Chapter 18

Crawfordton

The bell was rung for a full minute. Guardsmen showed up as expected. Many armed townspeople rallied as well on the Crawford's driveway, which was the only remaining open area in town large enough to host a rally of that size.

Captain Miller told everyone, "We need all available personnel to be ready to march on Delburg! Homeland Security is confiscating weapons!"

Noah Thomas, and his wife Sophia were present. Once Noah found out the nature of their mission, he said, "What?! We're not fighting Homeland Security! They are on our side!" Noah was heading back across the road to his house.

"That's crazy. They are only trying to keep the peace," Sophia said, then she followed Noah.

Henry told them, "Just remember that when you are handing over your weapons!"

In response Sophia just waved him off with her hand.

Jayden came out to assess his troop strength. "Ethan, get with Phil. Have him give each of your men instructions for contacting our allies. When they come back we want to hold your troopers back in reserve as scouts. You will stay here until called upon. Ethan, you are a lieutenant in the Guard now."

"Yes sir," Lieutenant Mentzer said. "I'll find Phil now. Thank you sir."

"We want the RPG-7 team to be in the assault group, attached to the HQ as usual. You know your role. Follow procedure."

"Yes, Colonel," both of the men in the fire team acknowledged.

"All Guardsmen will go in the task force, including the HQ platoon, except platoon C. Lieutenant Keller, you will command the home defense group. Make sure that someone watches Crawfordton from all directions."

"Yes sir," Lieutenant Keller said.

"And make sure we don't shoot at our allied reinforcements who we expect to arrive."

"Yes Colonel."

Jayden said to the regular folks, the unorganized militia, "Your fellow countrymen appreciate your willingness to stand up for your beliefs. You are doing the right thing. A victory now will give us a lot better chance for freedom."

One by one, after getting detailed directions, the scouts on horseback went out on their missions.

Jayden barked, "Assault group! Get plenty of provisions and as much ammunition as you can for a possible protracted operation."

Jayden looked to make sure he and Elijah were alone. He said to Elijah quietly, "I want you with me. I feel like I have no clue."

"No problem, Jayden. But you are doing great. You know we are going to lose some people if we go through with this."

"Are you questioning the operation?"

"Not really."

"Yea. I know there will be casualties. This ain't gonna be like the battle on Dan's Hill. It's on me. I've never felt so scared in all my life."

"Any commander in this situation would lose people," Elijah said.

Jayden grimaced. "We were already fighting for our lives. Most of our best young troops are out somewhere with Wilcox's division. Why is there always someone wanting to take whatever little we have?"

Elijah sighed. "That is the question I have been asking myself my whole life. I guess it comes down to everyone wanting somethin' for nothin'. They've run out of ways to do it, so now they just have to physically control everyone."

Captain Miller appeared before them. "Units assembled, sir."

The four platoons that made up the Crawfordton Guard were in rank and file. A few dozen other villagers were filled in among them.

Jayden said, "I'd like to say something to you."

"Listen up!" Captain Miller shouted.

Col. Jayden Phipps said, "During the American Revolution, only about 3% of the colonists took up arms against Britain's rule. They were actively supported by maybe 10% of the colonists. There was another 20% who were in favor of their cause but didn't do much of anything to help. Another one-third was for the King. Later in the war, there were actually more people fighting for the King than there were against him. The

rest of the people didn't take a side and just lived with whatever happened. The way I see it, this situation is about the same and you men and women are pretty much the same as the 3% that changed the world. I am proud to lead you into battle. Chaplain Howard, will you lead us in prayer?"

Angel prayed, "Our gracious Heavenly Father, we pray to you right now asking that you will watch over us in the field of battle and direct each of our actions, and that we will be victorious over our enemies in a just and worthy cause. Amen"

Jayden, Elijah, and Henry reviewed the troops. Jayden stared at them in the eyes. There were less than 100 of them.

"All right, Captain, let's move out. I think we'll just go ahead and secure the direct county road. Check out any potential choke points. Then let's capture the enemy checkpoint."

"Yes sir. I'll send Platoon B ahead on the road, with A and D flanking them."

A&D had to tromp through the tall grass that hid treacherous furrows still left from modern farming underneath. If there was to be an ambush they would stumble upon it first. But at least there was some cover if necessary. Platoon-B was out in the open.

"All right," Jayden said. "Headquarters will keep pace with you."

Platoon A was led by Lt. Kowalski, and Platoon D were led by Lt. Murphy. Both were untried in combat. Not knowing if they would maintain their composure under fire was a concern. Platoon B was led by Lt. Logan "Angel" Howard, who was more than capable at his rank. Lt. Keller and his marginal C-Platoon were the only platoon who garrisoned Crawfordton.

After a couple of miles heading westward down the county road, the group came to a woodlot on the north side. Captain Miller sent Murphy's platoon to check it out before the rest advanced. This was done without incident.

Jayden said, "Getting there may take longer than I thought."

Elijah said, "That will give our reinforcements more time to get here."

After D Company came back into position, the march continued.

"Hey, Look over there," Elijah said. "Some non-gangster looking farm boys are joining Murphy." They could see five clean shaven men come out from among the farm buildings with their baseball style caps and long guns.

Jayden said, I guess this is kind of the unofficial border with Delburg's farm holdings. Over there, Kowalski is talking to someone at that farmhouse."

A couple more farmers came out a minute later with weapons.

"I love it," Col. Jayden said. "It's not much farther to the Delburg Curtain."

After a couple more minutes, Jayden said, "I can see the roadblock up ahead. Do you see anyone up there?"

"Uhhhh. . .nope," Elijah said. Elijah wondered why he did not have the constant bickering with Jayden like he always had with Henry Miller. Elijah always considered himself temperamental under pressure. Maybe he just had an allergy to an irritant called Henry.

"This sucks not having a radio," Jayden complained. "It looks like the checkpoint was abandoned. That's what they get for using mercenaries. Mercenaries won't achieve victory. The only vested interest they have is money."

Elijah said, "They will help to a point, I suppose." He didn't want Jayden to get overconfident.

Jayden said, "I guess we have to assume that whoever was here is telling the others that we are coming straight up the road. So. . .We'll tell the Captain to head over to the large woodlot on the south."

"Yea, we better do something to mix it up," Elijah agreed. "But they are going to watch our every move."

"Is there a way to bait them into an ambush?" Jayden asked. "This ground is too open out here."

"We could head to the woods and see what nightfall brings," Elijah said.

"That sounds good. I'm not going to commit to an action that has no basis. I feel like I'm making this up as I go along. I'll send a messenger back to the House so the reinforcements will know what is going on."

Elijah wanted to add, "*If* we get any reinforcements", but stopped himself from demoralizing their Commander."

The Company set up ambushes but the enemy did not venture into the woods. Then they, waited several hours until it was dark and crept to the edge of the woods to set up a defense.

"I'm going to send a scouting party out," Col. Jayden Phipps said to Henry. "I've had about enough of these mosquitoes anyhow."

The entire woods hummed with beating mosquito wings. If anyone remained motionless for very long, the mosquitoes were looking to have them for dinner.

"We came here to do something," Jayden said, "so let's do it."

Capt. Miller said, "I'll tell Angel to send a squad out."

"Have them head uptown, toward the police station," the Colonel said. "Whoever goes has to be someone who knows the layout of the town."

In a few minutes there were some troops running from the woods into the dark.

A light rain started to come down. The trees held the water for a while, then it started to drip quietly down on the Company.

plip. . . plip. . . plip. . . pa-pa-pa. . . krak!

"Hey!" the Captain said, "That's some gunfire over to the north!"

"We gotta go," Jayden said. "Everyone on me!" Everyone exited the woods and went double-time toward the action. As they got closer Jayden said, "It sounds like it is coming from the YMCA."

The sound was intensifying.

Henry asked, "What about that squad we sent out?"

"We'll have to trust them to think on their own," the Colonel said.

"Halt!" Jayden said. "How do we know who is who?"

Elijah said, "Look, there's some cars coming from town. We can fire at them."

Jayden yelled, "Spread out! Get down! Fire on the cars!"

Now we are in war. Elijah thought. It undoubtedly sounded like it, and felt like it. The war from his memory didn't get much light rain though, mostly just sand blowing around that got into everything.

The targets were at a long range in the dark. shooting at them had to be ineffective, but the morale of those in the half-dozen cars was broken as they stopped short of the YMCA.

Elijah figured that the retreating column must be more of those uninspired mercenaries.

"Kowalski!" Jayden said. "Kowalski!"

"Here!"

"Come over here!"

In a minute Kowalski came up behind the leadership of the Company.

Jayden said, "Take your men over to the south side of those cars and block any retreat. Your fallback point is the woods we just come out of."

Kowalski ordered, "Platoon A! On me!"

"One shot per minute!" Henry ordered. "Save ammunition!"

The shooting frequency from the Crawfordton troops slowed to a little more than sporadic. But the fighting at the YMCA was still at a frenzied pace.

After several minutes, shooting was heard south of the stopped convoy. A single vehicle with two truck-like headlights and a searchlight was heading toward the action, then stopped. The vehicle was returning fire on Kowalski's platoon.

"Listen, to that over there," Elijah said.

plink. . . klink. . . and the sound of bullets hitting metal and some ricocheting.

"That's an armored vehicle with the searchlight," Elijah said.

"RPG! RPG!" Henry called.

The RPG-7 team, consisting of two members approached Henry. "Sir!"

Henry said, "Go find Kowalski over there. Jayden, I better go with them."

"Do it."

Elijah told Jayden, "It sounds like Kowalski disengaged."

"That's good. But I don't want his unit to break. They can pull back to a couple of other buildings on this side of the road."

Some of the cars were moving; trying to get turned around. Elijah thought about recommending an advance toward them, but then remembered what had happened on Dan's hill with Dan's headlights.

Then the hiss of the rocket fire came followed by the explosion on impact. The back of the vehicle had been hit. There was a fire. The vehicle was engulfed in flames, then brewing up inside with numerous secondary explosions. Echoes were resonating off of buildings all around.

"Nice work Henry," Elijah said. Clearly Henry's influence was involved in that situation. It is a given that the weakest armor of any armored vehicle, if it has a weak

point, is always on the back side.

Shooting from A platoon resumed. This time the firing was redirected toward the retreating cars, which then came to an abrupt stop. Soon all shooting had stopped.

"Cease fire!" Jayden ordered. "I think our side won."

"Yea, it think it's over," Elijah said. "At least for now. That ought to serve notice that we are in town."

"Let's go see what's going on," Jayden said.

Chapter 19

Delburg

As they got closer to the YMCA, Jayden still very cautious, uncertain about who was at the YMCA.

Jayden wanted to follow a protocol to see who was there but his men were already talking and mingling with the unknown entity. The light of the flames made everyone visible from the side of the vehicle. "Who are you guys," he asked.

"Shanesville Raiders," one of them said. "You guys did a nice job on that," he said pointing at the burning vehicle. "I don't know what that thing had, but it was finding my guys and picking them off as soon as they stuck their head out, even in the dark."

Elijah said, "That's an M-RAP with a CROWS system. Surprised it didn't get us all. Maybe too many targets at once, or couldn't tell them apart very fast. Maybe the CROWS operator had no clue."

"Maybe he didn't know a rocket was going to hit him," the Raider said.

MRAP is an abbreviation for the Mine Resistant Ambush Protection. The CROWS, or Common Remotely Operated Weapon Station allows an operator to remotely fire a weapon like a video game while safely inside the armored vehicle. The CROWS uses a variety of cameras and sensors to acquire and engage targets. One of an assortment of weapons can be installed on a turret on top of the vehicle.

"Listen up!" Jayden said. "This war is not over! There will be time to celebrate later! There could be more of them on the way right now!"

"That's right," Elijah said. "Let's get with the leader of the Raiders."

Eventually the commanders of the two forces found each other.

"Major Tom Zimmer, Shanesville Raiders." Zimmer was a short stout looking man with a commanding voice.

"Colonel Jayden Phipps, Crawfordton Guard. You guys okay?"

"Naw. We lost about ten guys. Ten out of the forty who came. Plus we've got several wounded."

"Sorry," Jayden said.

"Thanks, but we would have lost more if you wouldn't have showed up. In fact, they probably would have wiped us out. That rocket was a game-changer."

"Thanks Zimmer, for coming to help out."

"Our privilege. Once we heard what was going on, nothing would have stopped us from showing up."

Jayden asked, "Can you get your wounded back to Crawfordton? We have a decent clinic there."

"Some. Maybe."

Elijah wondered if Aliyah was going to be busy at the office.

Jayden asked, "How's your ammunition supply?"

"We can get by, with the attrition and all."

"Of course," Jayden said. "We need to set up a defense here. Tomorrow might be a busy day."

"Yes sir, Colonel," Zimmer said, respecting Jayden's rank with a salute. "Okay you guys! Heads up! Take positions!"

"That's embarrassing," Jayden said to Elijah.

"What?"

"That guy, after what he did, is saluting *me*? I'm nobody. Phil should have never promoted me. I don't have any experience in this. It's a joke."

"So what?" Elijah said. "That guy has enough responsibility without having to worry about us. Just go with it."

Lieutenant Kowalski reported to Jayden, "Sir, A-platoon lost two men."

"Sorry Lieutenant. You and your men did a great job we'll never forget. You're all heroes."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now have your men take defensive positions."

"Yes sir."

"I'm going to try and catch a few 'Z's," Elijah told Jayden.

"Really?"

"I'll be out behind the Y."

Jayden asked Elijah, "What should I do about that B-platoon squad?"

"Wherever they are, they must be getting a lot of good recon. Maybe send the rest of B back to the woods to rendezvous with the recon squad."

"Yea, that works."

While further comparing notes, Jayden discovered that the Raiders had two Barret Model 99 .50 cal. sniper rifles with top of the line optics. The men had owned the rifles for years and were in a constant competition with each other to see who could be the most accurate at a long distance. They had collected hundreds of rounds of the very expensive ammunition for the guns over the years.

When morning came, the severely wounded Raiders which could be moved, were assisted by the walking wounded and some of the others. This resulted in an even smaller number of available Raiders. Those KIA were covered for later disposition. Before doing anything, the Raiders would always defer to Jayden's authority. Something he had a tough time getting used to.

The Raiders were left at half strength. Meanwhile, the Guard actually had a net increase in numbers because of the added farmers.

Elijah was hobbling. He looked at his leg and saw a big bruise. Evidently he thumped it on a fallen log or something in the woods the night before. Now he was feeling some pain, but it wasn't much.

Lt. Logan "Angel" Howard reported, "Colonel, Sergeant Brian Keller's squad returned this morning. None of them were hurt. They picked up another fighter and shot up the Police Station before returning to the woods. They said they saw another one of those heavily armored Homeland Security vehicles in town. Given the time frame it couldn't have been the same one that we saw last night. It was dark in town, and with the cloud cover last night, it was real dark."

"Dang!" Elijah said. "Another dang M-RAP."

Jayden looked at Elijah, "I don't know what that means precisely, but let's figure out how to sabotage it or something before it comes after us. I miss my smart phone."

Elijah said, "Stay away from it."

"Really?" Jayden said.

"Really. They know we got the RPG and they won't let that happen again."

Then Jayden looked back at Angel. "Tell Keller he did an outstanding job. First rate," the Colonel said, "And the information is very valuable."

Elijah told Jayden, "It might be the time to overrun the enemy, Colonel. That smackdown we put on them last night might have degraded them quite a bit."

"I'm not willing to sacrifice everything; at least not right now," Jayden said.

Elijah said, "We might be able to get a better vantage point in town without sticking our necks out too far. You know that squad made it all the way to the Police Station."

"I don't know about an offensive during daylight. Seems too dicey."

"They might be saying the same thing."

"They might be right. No one really wants to make the Y an H. Q." Jayden said. "When you go in the Y, the walls, ceiling everything in there are covered with a layer of black mildew. It looks like Satan himself is in there. I guess its moisture from the pool. All the chlorine dissipated."

"Probably not so healthy either," Elijah said. Of course, long term health was not the main concern at the time.

"So I guess we probe further towards town," Jayden decided. "I'll get with Zimmer and our guys."

Elijah nodded.

"Those enemy combatants from last night have LM tattoos all over them," Jayden said.

"No big surprise there," Elijah said. "It may not seem much like it, but the world became a slightly better place last night."

Jayden nodded.

Captain Miller appeared and said, "Listen." Distant gunfire could be heard to the west. "Do we want to go check it out?"

"No," Jayden answered, "But that may be a distraction that will help us move uptown. Captain, would you please gather the officers?"

"Yes sir."

The Guard and Raider officers were all gathered behind the YMCA building.

"Sit down, men," the Colonel said.

The officers and Elijah all sat in the sparsely planted mulch with their backs on the wall.

Jayden was standing facing his officers. "We have a chance to win this battle outright. We are in town now. We have to go house-to-house now. We will start out here and expand our perimeter as we head towards downtown. It's a big job, but we want eliminate the threat here that is right here in our backyard. Now, Captain Miller is an expert at doing this, he has a lot of experience at it."

Elijah sarcastically thought, oh sure, Miller is a real expert. You shoot the front door to pieces then walk in and start shooting everyone.

Henry stood up. "Murphy, we want your platoon to do the actual searching. Two houses simultaneously. Everyone else will watch the back doors and protect the area while this is going on. As we go, the search will spread us out, but we don't want to give any turf back playing an endless game of whack-a-mole once we clear it. Is this understood?"

Murphy asked, "So what do we do, just knock on the front door?"

"Yes," Henry said, "ask them if they have seen any of the gang members or Homeland Security. Watch their eyes. They might be hostages in their own home."

Elijah said, "I just want to say one thing to y'all. Do not engage the other M-RAP. It is a highly sophisticated piece of military hardware. It can be taken out, but if we try, it will likely end terribly for us. They've got night eyes too. The best thing we can hope for is that they will forget to change the dang oil on it."

The town was very quiet. No one walked the streets. Whoever was living there, was not taking any chances by venturing outside.

So the searching commenced as follows: Empty house; burned out house; hungry family cowering in basement; empty house; scared innocent guy trying to run away from his house; house full of the smell of the dead; empty house; hungry guy answers door and is glad they are there, at least that's what he says. Then two gangland looking guys from an adjacent house were shot at but got away.

Jayden told Elijah, Major Zimmer, and Captain Miller. "We are getting close and they know we are here. I know we have not gotten very far, but if we keep going there are going to be casualties."

Maj. Zimmer said, "Something tells me it is time to secure what we have here. We put squads in each of these perimeter houses and set up an H.Q. in that middle house."

"Agreed," Jayden said. "We can operate out of this neighborhood. We have access to the road."

"You know those two runners were not LM," Elijah said. "At least not original Latin Mafia."

"How do you know," Jayden asked.

"The one dude had a hoodie, but the other guy was blonde with a blonde beard. Not so Latin."

Major Zimmer asked, "What's this about 'Latin Mafia'?"

Captain Miller said, "They are gangsters hired by Homeland Security to confiscate weapons for them."

Zimmer grimaced and shook his head. "No wonder you came here. Homeland Tyranny must be stopped. I say we keep going with the house-to-house."

Jayden said, "You know, I think we are talking ourselves right back into it. Whaddya say? "

"Huzzah!" Miller said. "They can only kill us once!"

Elijah knew Miller a very long time, but he was not sure if he was being sarcastic or not. Who says "huzzah"?

The house-to-house commenced: Scared hungry family; smell of death due to suicide lynching; Guardsman spooked needlessly and shot into an empty house; woman in a catatonic state; empty house.

The process was becoming more familiar to the platoon-D squads. Knock on the door; but then the door shattered as rounds came flying out of the door. Two of the squad members were hit and fell off of the small concrete porch. Then gunfire was coming out of the windows to the brick house, hitting Guardsmen who were trying to take cover. More fire came from another house that was next to the brick house. By the time the initial surprise was done, several Guardsmen had taken casualties.

Friendly units returned fire at the two houses. The Guardsmen and Raiders were deployed to three houses across the street and one next to the house that was being searched. Because of the crossfire It was not possible for anyone to assist any injured soldiers. Casualties were laying on the street and laying in front of and between the houses.

Ka-blammmmm! Lt. Angel had tossed a grenade through a side window of the brick house. Then he was firing shots blindly into the room. One of his men squatted down

and Angel used his shoulders as a ladder to hop into the room. Two more of his men followed, hopping on the man's shoulders and hopping in. Shooting stopped coming from out of the brick house. Then a battle within the house could be heard.

Jayden and Elijah saw part of Angel's Platoon-B actions from the backyard of the HQ house, which adjoined the back yards of the three houses in their control.

Jayden was running toward the back door of the house across the street from the brick house. "Cease fire!" Jayden shouted. "Don't fire at that house! You'll hit our own!"

The senior officers followed Jayden into the house directly across from the brick house. Elijah saw the front door across the street open. Angel waved to them.

"Thank God!" Elijah said. "Angel won!"

Soon firing stopped from the other gang-occupied house. Shanesville Raiders took the initiative to secure it.

Soon help went to those who had fallen. This was the worst number of casualties Crawfordton had seen in any action thus far. This time, however, a half dozen were already dead.

Elijah was looking at Jayden, who was staring down at one of the farm boys who fell fighting for his and their freedom. Soon, other farmers showed up, undoubtedly kin to the young man. They mourned their loss.

One of the Rangers was the go-to guy as a medic. He was trying to work on a man who appeared to be a lost cause. The victim was trying to wrest a breath of air amidst the blood gurgling inside of his airway.

Two more Guardsmen were moaning in pain from the hot lead. One had a leg wound and the other, a slug in the abdomen.

Henry ordered that two of men find a way to make a stretcher, or board or something to get the abdomen wound casualty back to Crawfordton ASAP. Also, the stretcher bearers were supposed to debrief Lieutenant Keller back at Crawfordton.

A shot was heard from inside the brick house. Elijah pulled his pistol and went in to investigate. Logan, the Angel of mercy had put a shot into a one of the dying enemy. Angel had on his face, not the look of retribution or anger, but of authority. Several other of his victims were also laying about or draped over furniture. When it came to combat, Lt. Angel was the real deal. At that moment Elijah had an ethereal or

surrealistic feeling that there was something other worldly about Lt. Logan Howard. Elijah had seen what the others had seen. He would never look at Logan the same again.

Elijah also tried to read the situation from a military intelligence standpoint. The dead inside of the brick house were not LM, they had no LM tattoos. Perhaps these were some other mercs. There was no uniformity to them as if they were part of a larger army that carried standard issue weapons. They were certainly not Homeland Security, or FDS, or whatever they were calling themselves to seem more virtuous. Maybe they were from the Goldfinch Coalition.

Major Zimmer said, "You know, if we could expand this operation a little further, we could gain control of the church with the tall bell tower. Then we could put a sniper up there."

Col. Phipps' eyes were glazed over. It was only a matter of time before this carnage became a reality during this dirty business. There was no more talk of willingness to sacrifice, now it was really happening. Jayden sighed and rubbed his face with his hands. "We need to regroup right now. I don't want us to be spread too thin. Let's take another look at it later. If it is dark out tonight, like it was last night, we'll use it."

Henry looked out the window. "It's sunny off to the west. My guess is nothing's coming in."

That night the sky was clear and illuminated with a full moon. It was very quiet. Jayden had his men spread out among a half dozen houses that formed a perimeter with interlocking defensive fire. An HQ was established behind the perimeter.

Most of the soldiers were able to sleep in short shifts, but all were on edge.

Then gunfire started pouring into the houses through anything that wouldn't stop a bullet. Glass was flying everywhere. Anyone who was not flat on the floor before hand quickly dropped. The pinned down defenders were bracing for a front door invasion at any moment.

The headquarters was busy trying to see who was not their own men and firing at them. They did manage to keep the enemy off of the back doors of the friendly houses.

One of the friendly house's front doors flew open as the enemy used a lawn jockey as a battering ram. Those would-be invaders were quickly dispatched. The lawn jockey dropped with a thud on one of them.

The enemy's attack stopped. It was quiet the rest of the night. There were zero friendly casualties.

Chapter 20

Delburg

It was still not known if the houses across the street were occupied by the enemy. Someone from each of the attacked houses sent an informant to the HQ.

Henry told Jayden, "The men are getting hungry. We are down to our last swallows of water."

Major Zimmer said, "They came after us with a lot bigger force last night. My recommendation is to advance to the rear."

Jayden looked at Elijah.

"It's not tenable; to do anything here, that is," Elijah said.

Jayden said, "If we leave, it has to be fast, and I mean really fast. Otherwise we'll have to stop and fight in the open. I'm not sure I want to do that. Maybe we could wait until nightfall."

Elijah said, "Don't forget about the M-RAP."

"There's always that," Jayden said. "Where in the hell is Wilcox with his third division?" he asked somewhat rhetorically.

Zimmer said, "We're not in Confederation territory since Delburg never joined, so maybe they won't come here."

Lt. Angel Howard said, "Myself and some others can stay here and hold them off, while you old timers get a head start."

Jayden said, "I can't let you do that. . .It's way too dangerous."

Elijah said, "A tactical retrograde makes sense right now."

"Sure it does," Angel said, "I think. . . If you break away without being detected, then they might not even come after us. They aren't shooting at us right now, are they?"

Jayden said, "I *hate* giving up territory, but at least we put a smack-down on the HS and the LM and whoever."

Everyone agreed non-verbally with the assessment of the operation and had to admit the planned retreat made sense. Certainly this event would slow down any gun confiscation campaign.

Henry asked, "Does Angel always win every argument."

"As often as you lose them," Elijah said.

"All right, then," Col. Phipps said, "we'll wait until dark. Hopefully, we get the cloud cover like we did two nights ago."

That night was a clear night again. Nevertheless, they went ahead with the evacuation as planned. Men were eager to get back home.

Platoon-B stayed back what seemed to be a couple of hours before Angel commenced their strategic withdrawal.

Perhaps there was a little too much clanking gear on Platoon-B, but there was some audible enemy yelling. They were shooting into the empty houses behind them.

Angel tried to moderate the volume of his voice the best as he could as they ran full-out in the dark. "Move! Move! Move! No looking back!"

When they hit the paved road the sound of their tromping and gear clanking carried for a distance. Random bullets cracked and whizzed by them. The adrenaline kept them going during the race of their lives.

They could hear a vehicle coming from behind.

Angel glanced over his shoulder. "M-RAP!" he yelled. "Scatter!"

The nightmare vehicle was firing on the move. Men were screaming as they were hit in the dark by the boxy steel beast from Hell. Angel stayed the course, straight up the gut down the road. The running continued for minutes, but no one dared stop.

"What the. . .," Angel said. "Oh." it was the checkpoint, a two-car roadblock. He heard a voice to his right saying, "Angel!" He ran toward it and fell into a hole with some troops.

CRASH! The Armored vehicle slammed in between the two cars at high speed and spun them around in opposite rotations.

Then a second later, *FOOOOM!* The MRAP had crashed into a ten foot long by six foot wide and six foot deep crater. The pit was a hand-dug trap in the middle of the road, through the pavement and road bed. The front end of the vehicle was a twisted wreck. The MRAP's occupants would be in no condition to do any more fighting.

Cheers erupted from the Allies. Their hard-fought battle of Delburg had now become what felt like a decisive victory. For all they knew, there were no more of the fearful MRAPs in the area.

After the surviving Platoon-B members had gotten their breath and wits about them, they started to realize what had actually happened. Phil had borrowed the digging crew from the fortress to come to do the job at the checkpoint.

"How did you know they would fall in your trap?" Elijah asked.

Phil said, "I knew you guys would stir up a hornet's nest in Delburg. After I heard about the vehicles from some of the wounded, it only figured that they would eventually chase you out of town. Nobody wanted to dig that thing, saying it was a waste of time and ruined a good road. They said I was crazy. I told them to 'shut up and keep digging.' Digging up that asphalt with a maddox was horrible. We ought to thank the Armistead County Engineer for neglecting the surface of this road though, otherwise we would have never made it."

Elijah said, "I wonder what the County Engineer would think of it now?"

These big slabs gives me some good ideas for the fort. Not to brag, but I guess it all worked out pretty well. There it is. Behold." Phil said pointing at the MRAP.

"Yep," Elijah agreed, "there it is."

Phil added, "Every once in awhile things have to go right, you know."

Murphy's Platoon-D was temporarily stationed at what became known as "the checkpoint", until relief could come. All others returned to their home towns.

At first light Jayden commanded the M2 .50 cal. machine gun be removed from the CROWS system on the top of the MRAP. Then he wanted to see if they could get into the vehicle to look for some other premium loot. The beast's shell was going to be too tough to breach. It would be better left for the professional scavengers and as a monument to another notable Crawfordton skirmish.

The diggers had done an extraordinary back-breaking job of not only digging the trap, but constructing defensive trenches. Big hunks of asphalt from the road were stacked up on the westward facing side.



There was no joy in Crawfordton that day. The bodies of the fallen had been lined up on the driveway to the House to be honored by the grieving, but grateful town. Loved ones were hovering over each of them.

Elijah watched Angel. He was openly crying real tears over the men in his unit, and others who were lost. What was it about this person? How was he so sensitive, yet

able to vanquish his enemies so methodically? Was he strong in his weakness or weak in his strength? Was it more than just luck that Crawfordton kept winning its battles, or the divine work of God? Did God listen to all their collective prayers, or perhaps just Angel's? And what of those bodies covered with all manners of cloth and rags? Was their sacrifice in vain? Is this all there is to be of their lives?

Ethan Mentzer gathered up his scouts. They lined up on horseback to pay tribute to the fallen heroes. They gave a salute to the dead and rode off.

For about a week, the enemy probed Crawfordton's defenses, exchanging sporadic gunfire from long distance with the outpost garrisons. Guardsmen took shifts in and out of the checkpoint and the other LP/OP locations. There was no time for them to do anything else. They were spread too thin. Business could not be carried on as usual. Gunshot wounds were frequent visitors to the Clinic.

After a couple of quiet days later, the bell in Crawfordton started ringing. The people were filled with dread every time the bell tolled, but now their anxieties were far more heightened. Threats could come from any direction and by an overwhelmingly sized adversary. A tolling bell could mean the end of their community.

Hearing the bell, Col. Jayden Phipps made himself visible in front of the House, looking to see what messenger would hail him. Finally, a Guardsman on a bicycle came zooming in through the shanties on the road and stopped in front of him.

"Sir," the Guardsman said, trying to catch his breath. "At. . .the. . .checkpoint. The UN is there."

"Huh?"

"Yea, they are in that goofy looking white UN vehicle and have the blue helmets and everything."

"One vehicle?"

"Yea."

"Go back and send them up."

"You mean tell them to come here?"

"Yea, tell them to come here."

People in the town, unaware of what was taking place, were hunkering down for any possible confrontation. The all white vehicle with giant "UN" letters on the outside approached. The town leadership met the French-built VAB amphibious light armored vehicle at the south end of town where a big oak tree lay across the road.

Perched in the command position was a skinny black man with the UN powder blue beret. He confidently hopped out of the vehicle like he was used to being in such situations. He was tall; too tall for his weight. He had on a plain green full uniform. His sidearm holster was empty with the flap sticking up. He casually walked up to the oak tree.

Some of the cowering people came out of their houses. Among those were the Thomases, who looked absolutely giddy with glee.

"Greetings, I am Captain Gahiji Kamanzi of the United Nations," he said with a French-African accent. He had a Rwandan shoulder patch with the blue, yellow, and green Rwandan flag patch.

"Ga-hee-jee?" Jayden asked.

"Yes."

They shook hands. Gahiji shook hands with all of the leaders, except Phil, who stared at Kamanzi with contempt.

"Dis is a bery crowded place," Captain Kamanzi said. "Dere are plenty of available homes in Delburg. Delburg is gun-free. We want to offer homes for people here to go move into."

The crowd around the group moved in closer. Some heard the comment, and were exuberant to the point of disorder. The word spread throughout the town.

Noah Thomas said, "We're moving to Delburg!"

Others got more rowdy wanting to close in to listen. Henry started pushing some of the eavesdroppers back.

Jayden looked at the Thomases peevishly.

"That's right," Sophia said. "Let's get out of this stupid war zone! They're getting rid of guns in Delburg and have UN protection."

Jayden said, "Stop and think what you are doing here."

Noah said, "You expect me to trust you more than the entire United Nations? How stupid are you?"

"You're a *moron*!" Phil said to Noah.

"You shut up you stupid redneck!" Noah said.

"Just go!" Jayden said.

"Oh no!" Noah said. "You have to auction our house first! It's your own idiotic law!"

"We'll auction your house, all right," Jayden said, "but the money will go to the town."

"You can't do that, you damn thief!" Noah screamed. "That is *our* house!"

"Then go get a lawyer!" Jayden said. "Cry all you want! But it was okay for you to vote for your damn liberals to take money from other people though, huh?!"

Noah stood there confounded. "Come on, Sophia," Noah said, "let's get our stuff and get out of this hellhole. Let's sell our guns. They are the whole cause of all of this trouble."

"Let's go now so we can get first pick of a house," she said. "When we get to Delburg, we will be home free!"

Gahiji said, "The resettling will be for da best. We want to unite the United States back to its original condition. Eef we take all de weapon by negotiation or by force we can avoid an endless succession of wars in America een da future. Now, another matter I would like to discuss is your use of an RPG against a Homeland Security Vehicle."

"Shall I shoot him now?" Phil asked.

Elijah wondered if it was possible that they would execute an unarmed UN officer. That would certainly draw some negative attention.

"No, " Jayden said, "Everyone just take it down a notch here!"

Kamanzi was not phased. "If you will bring me da RPG, zen I can guarantee dat you will have our involvement in your protection."

Jayden said, "No army is complete without one. The answer is no."

Kamanzi eyes started blinking rapidly. "I don' sink you understand. Eef you don' bring me da RPG den you will be subject to da progressive compliance actions."

Jayden's black face was turning red. "Go."

"What? Zu took da aggressive action against Delburg! Don' do it again!"

"Get the gangsters away from us!" Jayden demanded. "They are all around us!"

"You bringed it upon your own selves. Dey are private contractors."

"No! You're wrong!" Jayden said. "If we give up our weapons, we die! If they give up their weapons, there is no more war!"

"Dey only doing dere job."

"Go back to your own country!" Phil said. "We don't need you here! You are helping the wrong people!"

Kamanzi hopped back up on the VAB. "Lemme know eef zu change ze mind."

"Huh?" Henry asked.

"Who gives a crap what he says?" Phil said.

Within the hour a large group of Crawfordton residents had uprooted themselves and were on the trail to Delburg. Among these were the Thomases with their two sons. The boys looked back and waved to Phil and Elijah. Elijah suspected the boys might someday each turn into someone great.

Also Trevor C. Banks was on the move with his meager provisions. Elijah hoped that the poor soul could find some relief and happiness at his new home.

They were surprised to see Mrs. Welch leave. They thought she enjoyed her life as it was. Perhaps she thought as many progressives did, that the United Nations was synonymous with utopia. Her house was already almost completely being used as a community center. Now the activities that were housed there could be expanded.

Jayden looked at Elijah. "Elijah. Let's make sure we send a spy in that group."

"Good idea." Elijah said.

Chapter 21

Crawfordton

Elijah was trying to think of the qualifications needed for a spy to send to Delburg. Their espionage agent had to be someone intelligent enough to pull it off. As an agent of Crawfordton the spy had to be trustworthy enough to keep quiet about his mission and agrees with the worldview of the leadership. They had to be someone who was available to do it, and wanted to do it. It wouldn't work to have someone who was recognizable as a possible spy by any of the Crawfordton people going to Delburg; so he didn't want anyone from the Guard. It was not so pleasant to contemplate but the person should be expendable. This mental screening left exactly zero candidates.

Jayden was right. They needed to seize the opportunity and send someone now. They should have thought this all out beforehand. It would take too long to go recruiting in Shanesville. If their spy got there now among the good sized crowd moving to Delburg, they would fit in without notice.

Elijah thought of his wish list of qualifications. He started building a mental profile of his spy. Where would a smart person go in Crawfordton? Simple; The library. So he went over to the library. Amy was there teaching school in one of the two rooms upstairs that was full of children.

An older woman was serving as the new librarian. "Hello."

"Hi there." Elijah thought, Okay, now once this spy got here, what kind of a book would he check out. Something . . . He was looking around. The books were divided up into sections. Something. . . Then, after about a half an hour of browsing, he saw a hardcover book titled, *100 People Who Are Screwing Up America*. Something that Phil probably saved for posterity.

He opened the front of the book. Inside the front cover were due dates. This book had only been checked out once. June 6th was crossed out, the return date. Elijah asked the librarian, "Miss, can you help me? I would like to know who checked out this book."

"Oh I don't think I can give out that information," she said.

Elijah said, "It's kind of important. It's a security issue."

The woman looked confused. She got out her spiral notebook. "They brought the book back."

"Yes. I know. It's right here. Do you know who had it out?" Elijah could see that her notebook had names and dates and the titles of books on each line. "Can you tell me who had this book out?"

"Oh, I don't know about that. That is private information."

Elijah was not sure how to proceed. He had seen a lot less security at a lot more important places in his days. Maybe she was going to get all *Judge Dredd* on him if he got out of line. Judge Dredd? Elijah realized he needed a nap. "You know, sometimes my memory is not so good. Can you tell me if I returned *Harry Potter* on June 6th?"

"Which Harry Potter?"

"I forget. Does it matter?"

"What is your name?"

"Henry. Henry Miller." Elijah knew that he was being such a naughty boy giving Henry's name as an alias.

She turned the pages in her notebook back to June the 6th. Elijah was reading upside down as she slowly indexed through the entries. He spotted the "100 People" entry. The writing was not so good, even right side up. Ben. . . *Smil-len*?

"No, you never returned it. I need to make a note of it."

"Okay. Bye." How was he supposed to find Ben Smillen? Elijah knew some of the places where Smillen *wasn't*. So he would just go to each of the land owners in town until someone said they knew him. He spent half the day doing this.

He knocked on another door.

A woman came to the door. "Yes?"

"I'm looking for a Ben Smillen. Do you know him?"

"Ben Smillen? I know a Ben. But I think his name is Snellen. Maybe. Do you mean Ben Snellen?"

"Uh. . .yea." The throbs of fatigue were setting in. Elijah reminded himself that just because their names were close doesn't mean they were equally as qualified for the job.

"What did he do?"

"Oh he didn't do anything. Where can I find him?"

"He lives in our back yard in a pup tent. He's probably at work right now."

"Okay. Thanks." Elijah checked the simple person pup tent made out of a tarp. There was a cooler and a few things in the tent, but no Ben Snellen. Elijah decided that he would just sit down for a bit and wait on Ben.

"Who are you?"

Elijah heard the voice and woke up what seemed like a couple of hours later. He wanted to say "Henry Miller" again, but decided against it. "I'm Elijah Williams. Are you Ben Smillen?"

"Snellen. What's on your mind." Ben had an all-black beard and hair. He had on a black baseball style hat with a simple white logo of some sort. He wore khakis and an shirt with a single pocket on it. He was putting down his backpack, which likely contained his worldly belongings, and he had a semi-auto pistol of some sort on a hip holster.

"Mr. Snellen, I was at the library doing some research, and I came across the fact that you checked out a book titled 100 People Who Are Screwing Up America. . ."

"What are you, the Thought Police? Library fine Nazi?"

With that response, Elijah thought immediately that Ben might be his man. "Oh, no no. I am here to make you a proposition."

"Does it involve me having more than just a pup tent?" Ben said sarcastically.

"Yes, it does, actually."

"It does?"

"Here's the thing, there are a lot of people moving to Delburg. I know for a fact that there are a lot of nice houses there. The UN is putting people in those houses."

"The UN? No thanks. They are no friends of ours. They will take our guns. I can't do that."

"No. Wait, Ben," Elijah said, looking around. I am from the Crawfordton Headquarters. We want someone like you to just kind of, fit in, then report back to us what is going on. We will give you money for information."

"You mean like a reporter?"

"Well, yes, Ben, kind of."

"Oh. . .I get it. You mean like a *spy*."

"Yes. Ben, we agree that the UN and the Homeland Security are our enemies right now and this repatriation of people to Delburg into houses is a good opportunity for us to place a spy.

"I guess I could, I mean, I want to help. I would get a house, money and a purpose. I don't have a family anymore. They died."

"Sorry Ben. Your help sure would be valuable. You seem like a smart guy."

"Sure, I can do the job. I have nothing to lose, that's for sure. I'd like to be of help. What do I do?"

"Just go over there and get situated the best you can. Please don't breathe a word of this to anyone. You could end up getting hurt. Come back in a couple of weeks and give us a full report."

"That's it?"

"That is plenty. Unfortunately it would be better for you to leave your gun here."

"Oh, man. How do I know this is not some kind of scheme to get my gun?"

Elijah thought, this is definitely the guy. "They will check you out thoroughly the first time. Come on up to the House and we will have someone hold it for you."

"Deal."

They shook hands.

Elijah said, "It might be prudent to give you an alias. How about. . .um. . ."

"Rock," Ben suggested.

"Sure, why not, Rocky Smillen."

"I guess I can live with that. "Smillen." Is that even a name?" Rocky had a little smile on his face as he took down the tent.

Elijah found some satisfaction in starting up what might turn into a spy network. They certainly had an interest in what their neighbors to the west were up to. A lot depended upon Rocky Smillen."

Chapter 22

Crawfordton

Amy and Phil Crawford were out walking in the morning, each holding one of the hands of their adopted daughter, Angela.

Angela was emotionally still buried deep within her protective shell of silence. Maybe she would never emerge to the point of sociability, at least not in Crawfordton. Amy's concern was that the more unusual she acted, the less likely the stigma of her past would dissipate.

"Look lil' darlin'," Amy said. "There's a blue butterfly. See it?"

She never even looked up.

Phil said, "Angela. . ." He was stopped in mid sentence by the impact of a bullet into the chest.

"Phil?" Amy was at first confused. "Phil! Phil! Help! Somebody help!"

Elijah was nearby and heard the shot, upon seeing Phil, he immediately crouched down and pulled his pistol from its holster. While everyone else was running away or staring at Phil, Elijah was looking around trying to figure a bullet trajectory that hit Phil.

"No. . .No," Amy cried. "It can't be. God! No!"

A couple of bystanders attended to Phil. Once they realized what had happened, one ran for cover but the other started to urgently get Phil to the Medical Clinic. Amy and the large man pulled Phil to the Clinic which was less than 100 feet away.

Phil moaned. He was conscious. A trail of his life blood was pouring out behind them.

Elijah scoped the area. There were only a couple of lines of sight where a long range bullet could have gotten Phil. One was a narrow path between two houses that was only about 10 degrees wide. The other was a path that from the road facing south. That one was only about 15 degrees wide. The single gunshot's direction was hard to determine by sound, but it didn't sound like it came from either of those two directions.

Some Guardsmen came to the scene and looked at Elijah for answers.

"Wait! That silo!" Elijah looked up at the top of the tall grain silo at the nearest farm. "Come on!" Elijah had doubts that they were doing the right thing by all three

committing to the same location. When it came to relying upon educated hunches, he liked using the first one that popped into his head.

The men started running toward the farm. It would take at least a few minutes for the assailant to get to ground level if he was at the top of the silo. It would take them about three minutes to get to the base of the silo.

Phil was brought into the Clinic. Both Aliyah and Tammy were there. They were trying to pull a rotten tooth out of a older man. They were stunned to see Amy and her helper pulling in Phil. All three were covered with Phil's blood. Angela was close behind.

"He's been shot," Amy said. "He's really hurt. Please."

"Okay, Amy. We'll take care of him," Aliyah said. Then she ordered, "Get him on the table. Tammy, get that shirt off." She was looking frantically at her medical paraphernalia which was stored in kitchen cabinets while Phil was being readied for treatment.

Tammy told Amy, "Keep pressure on that wound." Then she said, "Aliyah. He's having a lot of trouble breathing." This was an understatement. Phil sounded like he was half underwater trying to breathe.

Aliyah pulled out a chest syringe. "Yea, I know. I was looking for this. We're looking at a pneumothorax here."

Amy said, "What? Is he gonna die? You gotta get the bullet out Aliyah."

Aliyah said while she was working, "The bullet is hot, Amy. It may not be causing any trouble right now."

"Just keep the pressure on, Amy," Tammy insisted. Blood continued to flow from the hole in Phil's left upper chest. To the untrained, it looked like a lot of blood. "Dr. Williams will do her best." Aliyah was the doctor on any emergency cases that came into the Crawfordton Clinic. But Tammy was the doctor when a baby was ready to come into the world, which had only occurred once so far.

Aliyah kept looking through her stuff. She pulled out a cruddy looking plastic tube and an old Dr. Pepper two-liter plastic bottle. Phil's body started to shudder.

"No, Phillip! No!" Amy said. "He's getting blue!"

Aliyah took her hand and was feeling Phil's ribs. "Two. . .Three. . .Okay just above the third. Tammy, dip this syringe in vodka." Aliyah kept her finger on the spot she had located, which was nowhere near the wound. After the syringe dipping, she took the

syringe back and inserted it in the spot. A rush of air with splatters of blood came out of the syringe. Aliyah put the hose on the syringe and run the hose into the bottle.

Phil heaved.

Elijah and the two Guardsmen startled the shooter who had just gotten to the bottom of the very long ladder on the exterior of the silo. He was holding a very long barreled rifle and was starting to run after the long descent.

"Get him!" one of the Guardsmen yelled and they were in pursuit.

Elijah wanted to chase, but after the three minute hard run to the location his feet were like concrete. He left the foot pursuit to the others. While he was stopped, and bent over with his hands on his knees, Elijah thought back years ago when hot pursuit was his specialty. Who would remember all of those episodes now? Did it matter? He soon lost track of the whereabouts of the sniper and the fellow hunters who ran around the farm. Elijah figured that the attack was either a planned hit on Phil or just another terrorist attack on Crawfordton. He would have liked to interrogate the attacker, but was fine with him that they just hunted the sniper down like the dog he was.

What if Phil was dead? Elijah wondered. How much more trouble could they all endure?

Moments later, Elijah heard several shots. There was no way the sniper's bolt action rifle could have run off that many shots that quickly, so he knew the sniper was being shot at. Probably dead.

At the clinic, Phil spit and gagged. He could breathe again. His color returned.

"Praise God!" Amy said.

The bullet wound had put a hole in Phil's lungs that allowed air and blood to go into the surrounding cavity but could not get out, much like a one-way valve. So the pressure increased in the chest cavity to the point that the heart was struggling and the lungs could not function. Once the pressure in the cavity was released through the hose into the Dr. Pepper bottle, normal function returned.

"Good," Aliyah said. "Now that the pressure is stabilized, we can think about getting that bullet out."

"I've got the wound," Tammy said to Amy, who let go of the wound.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Amy asked

"Amy. . ." Phil said.

"Phil!" Amy said, hugging him.

Phil moaned in pain. "Babe. . ."

Tammy pulled Amy away with her free arm. "You're going to have to wait outside, Amy."

"Phil!"

Aliyah held Amy's shoulders and pulled her away. "We have to let him rest as much as possible. Removing the bullet is never a simple thing."

"Is he going to be okay?" Amy asked.

"He is not safe yet," Dr. Williams said. "The worst may be ahead. Go home and pray dear."

Meanwhile, the Guardsmen brought the gangsteresque looking corpse to Elijah. He had a bunch of flames inked on his neck and a "Barons" tattoo on his arm.

"Never heard of 'em," Elijah said. Someone needed to pay for this. But who? Elijah suspected, and was sick of hearing about the infernal Goldfinch Coalition. It was time to get to the bottom of it. First, he had to check on Phil.

A crowd of well-wishers were outside of the clinic waiting for some word on Phil's condition.

Everyone gasped when Dr. Williams came out on the front porch looking like a butcher at the meat market. She looked stressed and tired.

Aliyah said, "He's doing okay."

Cheers were heard through the crowd.

"He just needs to heal without any infection. We'll know more in a couple of days."

Elijah walked up the steps. "Good work, Doctor."

Aliyah said under her breath, "He still may not make it. That bullet is in a bad place. The surgery is going to be horrible." She held up her hands. "We don't have anything here. If we were still in Detroit, it would be no problem. . . Well, old Detroit. I'll probably get it over with later today. I have to think it through first. Did you catch the son of a bitch?"

"No, but I had help. He won't be doing that again."

"Good enough then."

Elijah went to report what he knew of the sniper. He found Jayden in the House upset and angry.

"They're provoking us," Jayden said. "The HS-UN Axis is trying to provoke us into fighting them. They won't attack us openly because they want to win over the populace, or what's left of it. Dirty, rotten. . ." He held up his index finger while he stared into space, an indication that he was mentally trying to validate an idea. He paced the floor as he spoke. "If they want a cold war, then we can fight a cold war. You mentioned you suspect this sniper was from the Goldfinch Coalition, right?"

"Uh, maybe. I'm just going by what Wilcox said and the tattoo on the guys arm."

"Then maybe we should start hitting their proxies. Maybe we should teach Goldfinch a lesson."

Elijah said, "We could send someone over there to mess them up."

"Sure," Jayden said, "Sabotage; assassination; whatever. You interested?"

"Well, I . . . Can I ask you a question?"

"Okay."

"How do you know all this stuff?" Elijah said, realizing that he had changed the subject. "I mean, what kind of a job did you have before this all happened?"

"Well, I was a heating and ventilation guy."

"Huh?"

"Yea, I know that doesn't have much to do with all of this, but you have to remember, we saw this coming, so we wanted to know as much as possible. There is a lot more to being a prepper than going out and buying a shotgun and growing a postage stamp garden. Here, let me show you something." Jayden led Elijah into the next room to a bookshelf. "Here are some of Phil's books he did not donate to the library. Here, look at this." He handed Elijah a book.

Elijah read the front jacket aloud, "*Holding Your Ground. Preparing for defense if it all falls apart.*"

"Good stuff," Jayden said. Phil has a ton of this stuff.

"So, how did you know Phil?"

"He was in plumbing, and I worked at the same place."

"Phil was a plumber?"

"Well, yea. We all worked, you know? Phil knew politics and economics. He learned it on his own. He kept saying for the last twenty years that this would all happen. No one really listened, and that is where some of the bitterness he has comes from. But Phil started taking actions and learned all he could. Phil started preparing, or what we call prepping." Jayden put the book back on the shelf and leaned on it with his hands, staring down to the floor. "It's amazing the difference one guy can make."

"And you?" Elijah asked.

"I don't really know so much. I think it probably shows."

"No, actually the opposite. That's why I asked."

"Really. I don't know much compared to Phil. It's because of Phil one way or another that all of us here are surviving. I listened to him. . . eventually. So are you going to go to Indiana, or what?"

Elijah sighed. "I suppose. . . ah, yes, I will plan on going there soon. Maybe tomorrow."

"You are a intel rock star. Nice work on finding that sniper."

"Thanks, Jayden."

Elijah still wondered why he so readily accepted dangerous missions. "If possible, I would like to take Captain Miller along."

"He's busy around here, but I know this is important. Okay, sure, tell him I want him to go with you."

Elijah said, "By the way, we have a mole in Delburg now."

"Good work again, Elijah. You are a huge asset to our nation."

Chapter 23

"Fine! I'll go but we are even now!" Henry said, sitting in the recliner in their living room.

"No," Elijah said, "you'll go because Jayden told you to. Besides, this is right up your alley; mayhem and destruction."

"You never forget anything."

"Oh yea, *minor* things like dragging me along to shoot up the insides of the Latin Mafia headquarters."

"Hey, it worked out."

"Sure it did. Nothing became of that, did it?"

"So, are you taking the rodent with us?"

"Rata the superspy? I have no idea where he is. Are you recommending him?"

Henry said, "We should find another operative to go with us. The more the merrier, they say."

"Misery loves company. True. More agents, more results, but more detection. Who do you want?"

"How about Angel?" Henry said.

"Better not. What if something happened to both you and Angel?"

"I know. We can't spare anyone," Henry said. "Not even me, really."

"Yea, I know, but we'll be careful this time."

"Yea," Henry said, "No more Boondock Saints."

Elijah said, "You'll never get me to believe that you would commit to a non-Boondock lifestyle."

The trek to Goldfinch took them the long way around Delburg. The terrain in the area across the State Line was not as flat. There were also more trees in the area than around Crawfordton. The Goldfinch Distribution Center was not in Ottawa, Indiana, but just to the east of it.

Movement anywhere outside of their zones of control was very slow and very risky. There were still roving bands looking for anything to eat, and would do whatever

it took to succeed. They found a train track that ran in the general direction of their destination. They figured that following the train track kept them off of a higher risk road. The ballast on the rail bed still kept the weeds down, making movement easier. It was better than being in two foot tall grass or four foot tall weeds. But it was not nearly as easy to walk on the ballast as a road.

Elijah said, "Man, my feet are killing me."

"How are your shoes?"

"Terrible."

"Hold it boys!" a man's voice behind them said. "Put your hands up!"

Miller and Williams complied by raising their hands. Three more armed militia types in front of them, one a woman, appeared from among the trees and popped up on the rail bed.

"Who are you and where you headed?" The short dark haired woman asked.

Elijah said, "Joe Schmo and we're headed to Kokomo."

"That's hilarious," The woman said, looking more angry.

One of the guys behind them was going through their packs. He stepped in front of them. "Fortunately for you, we are the good guys."

Henry asked, "Were you guys involved in some shooting a couple of times west of Delburg?"

"No," a middle-aged man said. "We avoid all entanglements."

Elijah said, "You think that makes you better?"

"It increases our shelf life," the man said. "Give it up. Who are you?"

"We're from Crawfordton," Elijah said.

"Oh yea?" the middle-aged man said. "Well, no stolen loot or body parts for a snack. You can put your hands down."

Elijah was pleased that the Crawfordton name carried some weight. "Actually, we were headed to Goldfinch; in Ottawa."

The woman asked, "So why are you coming back here on the tracks and sneaking around about it?"

Henry said, "We thought we would avoid running into someone like you."

She said, "I'm not so bad." Then she struck a pose.

The middle-aged guy said, "You guys can go. You're not mad, right?"

Henry said, "I'm not." He pointed at Elijah. "He's always mad."

Elijah shook his head. "So who was skirmishing with Delburg the other day?"

The man said, "That was who we liked to call the 'Moonbeams'. They are, or were, like, some kind of cult or who knows what."

Elijah asked, "How did they fare?"

"They lost. I think they're all dead."

The woman said, "They were just all plumb dumb. They served no useful purpose. We heard you guys took out those Jeeps on steroids."

"Yep," Henry said.

"Nice," She said. "It will be all clear up ahead. Well. . .have fun at Goldfinch."

"We intend to," Henry said.

Then they continued on. From a distance they could see the sprawling Goldfinch complex. It appeared to be a city-state unto itself. There were no other buildings near it. As they approached it, they looked all around for any sentries.

Cautiously, Williams and Miller crept onto Goldfinch's property. Miller and Williams were hiding behind a row of small six-foot pine trees at the side of the property that still had the lower branches. Goldfinch Distributing Company had multiple enormous warehouses. The entire campus was surrounded by a twelve foot high chain link fence. A single blue flag with a goldfinch on it flew while the other two flagpoles were empty. There were several people hauling goods by truck in and out of the Center.

Elijah, without speaking, pointed out three armed guards situated in various locations around the perimeter of the mammoth Distribution Center. "How we gonna get in there?"

"Look over there," Henry said, pointing at an all white straight truck coming around the corner of a building. It was much smaller than an 18 wheeler. It had the unmistakable "UN" on the side in giant letters.

"Hey," Elijah said, "are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Probably not," Henry said, "since I'm not thinking about anything."

Elijah wondered if that was even possible. "We could take out those Smurfs, then it might generate some tension between the Goldfinch Coalition and the UN."

"Better hurry up if you're gonna do it," Henry said. "You know, I'm feeling a little Boondock right now."

"Hey," Elijah said. "I got an idea how to do this. You know that sharp curve back there?"

"Yea?"

"We can Boondock all you want on the other side of that curve."

"Yea. I get the picture."

"Smurfs gotta take that road back to Delburg, right?"

"Probably," Henry said. "Can I use your pistol?"

"Sure."

To be truly like Boondock Saints, one had to do their blasting with two semi-automatic pistols.

Elijah said, "Then we take the truck and the food."

"Works for me."

They backed away from the row of trees slowly, then jogged back to the sharp bend in the road. The bend in the road was constructed that way due to a rocky knoll.

"Okay Henry, you know the drill."

"Sure do. They come around this sharp curve going about 15 miles per hour, then we blast the hell out of their windshield. We shoot them before they have any chance to do anything."

About five minutes later the reliable plan worked to perfection. Henry opened up with both pistols and Elijah used his rifle.

They tossed the Smurfs out on the roadside and hopped into the truck with a shattered windshield and headed for Crawfordton.

"Dang! They need to keep their vehicles more tidy." Elijah was riding shotgun. He said, "I think Phil would approve of this action. In fact, I know that he would. What do you think about Rwandans being here, though?"

Henry said, "The UN has no business here. We have the responsibility to cause Rwandans or whoever, enough pain so they will leave. They started to go up a steep grade. Henry poured on the gas and the engine was banging. "Oh yea," Henry said. "I can tell this thing is heavy. We got a pretty good haul of something here. This thing is running like crap. I think they hand ground their dinosaurs for fuel." The truck was jerking around and sputtering. "So, do you think we are we the bad guys now?"

"No, we're just misunderstood."

The truck rattled its way non-stop to Crawfordton. As expected, the Guardsmen on the edge of town got pretty anxious when they saw a UN vehicle approaching. Once they saw Captain Miller driving, they were pleasantly excited. They motioned them on. Henry pulled the truck up to the big oak laying across the road. They got out of the truck and looked behind them. A crowd started to gather to see what was going on. Elijah got the back open after beating on the latch a bit. There were four pallets in the back of the truck. Each pallet had a very heavy corrugated box with no lid on it. Elijah climbed up into the back to look inside the boxes. The open boxes were each full of hundreds of cans of pasta and meat sauce. They were jumble packed into the containers like someone tossed them in. Many were dented, but all looked good for consumption.

"Henry! Look!" Elijah held up a can.

"What do we do with all that?" Henry asked.

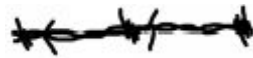
Elijah looked at the gathering crowd. Their sullen expression on their dirty faces, their hungry emaciated forms, their ragged clothes. He was moved to compassion toward them. "Free food Everyone! Come get free food! Free food!" Screaming this to the people was like therapy. It felt deep down good. "Make sure everyone gets some, or I'll get really mad!"

People started climbing up into the truck. Elijah got out before he was swarmed. For an instant he thought he might not make it. Cans of food were rolling out of the truck and people were scooping up as many as they could possibly carry.

Elijah and Henry started walking to the center of town yelling "Free food" and pointing back at the truck. He told Henry, "We gotta get the truck empty and get rid of it."

Henry was looking back at the mob and said, "It won't take long. I'll hide the truck out at the barn by the cemetery."

"Sounds good." Elijah showed Henry one of the several cans he grabbed. He sang the TV commercial jingle, "We're having Beefaroni."



Carlos Gutierrez, the former Latin Mafia Enforcer, and his girlfriend, Jackie, had been working as farm hands at a place a mile away from Crawfordton. The distance from town put him outside of the competition of the normal Crawfordton labor market. So they were paid a little more. Their income was enough to feed them and put away a some extra dimes for something better later on.

Carlos and Jackie had no vehicle for either transportation or living quarters. They lived in a small section in the loft of the farmer's dilapidating barn. Some empty plastic feed bags were tacked up to help keep drafts out of their home. They slept huddled together on a bed of straw, which was warm, but sometimes infested.

They woke up early one morning to the sound of a car honking a loud horn. Jackie peeked between two boards on the barn siding. It was Rata's armored car. They climbed down the ladder and approached his car.

"Hey," Rata said.

"Hey," Carlos said.

"I was just wondering if you would want a job," Rata asked.

"We got jobs," Jackie said.

"Okay, now listen. I can pay you some good money as a helper.

"How much," Carlos asked.

"No!" Jackie said. "I can't believe that you guys would do business with Goldfinch. They are shooting at people who didn't do anything."

Rata held up his hands. "It is what it is, okay? It's only business."

Jackie responded, "*Dirty* business. Those Goldfinches are our enemies. This is our home now. You guys are helping our enemies. I thought that you guys were heroes, not traitors. If you are going to do something like that, they you should have just stayed in the Latin Mafia!"

Rata said, "How do you know Goldfinch has anything to do with it?"

Jackie said, "Come on Rata! You may not be that great looking, but you are a lot smarter than you are sounding right now!"

Rata said, "You got some weird taste in men."

Carlos scowled at Rata, then he said to Jackie, "Ain't you sick of being in that damn barn?!"

"I'll never be that sick! Jackie knew she might lose the argument and tried a more reasoned tone. "I would never want you to risk your life, especially for something bad. Are you still a gangster?"

"No, Baby, no."

"Well, I'm going," Rata said. He looked at Carlos, hoping he would also ignore Jackie. "You in?"

Carlos put his hand on Jackie's chin. "I just want to make a little extra money right now. For us."

Jackie pulled her chin away. "Stay away from any of those people, it's too dangerous."

Carlos got into the car with Rata and they drove away from the farm. Jackie turned away, disappointed.

Chapter 24

Delburg

Delburg was being transformed into a Worker's Paradise. Everyone was assigned a job. Most were sent out on the agricultural collectives that the quasi-city-state controlled. Despite Noah's pleadings that he was management material, he was assigned to such a collective. Each day he would bring home a couple of cans of food as payment for his day's work. He was actually earning less food for the same amount of work than when he was at Crawfordton.

In Crawfordton, the people kept the rewards of their productivity for themselves. In Delburg, a hefty slice of the productivity was taken off of the top. It was the priority that the proportionally large number of private contractors had to have their bellies filled with food. This arrangement was not one that favored those who were sweating and breaking their backs.

It turned out that the Delburg house the Thomases settled into was not nearly as nice as the one they abandoned on Harris Road. Sophia's scheme to get an extra nice place fell apart because all the best places were awarded to cronies of the Homeland Security Officers. This meant that the gang leaders were given dibs on whatever houses they wanted, even if they had to make someone move out of their house.

People came up missing in the name of "security". So paradoxically, no one had any feeling of security in Delburg.

The Thomases soon believed they had made a mistake moving to Delburg. By following their liberal ideals they had found that their expectations of the HS-UN society were woefully not met. Sophia was told that she had to work, and the boys were sent to a daytime holding area, called "Child Care". If the children were sent there without a lunch by the parents, then they would not get one that day. There were no planned activities for them. They would become bored and get into trouble, which would invariably end in corporal punishment.

Sophia Thomas was a woman of uncommon good looks. This often brought the unwanted attention of many of the gangster hirelings in her direction.

It was a typical hot day out in the field. It seemed like most of the work that was being done had no purpose, other than to punish the workers, or to make it look like they were doing something productive to the Homeland Security hierarchy.

A couple of undersized armed security escorts started groping on Sophia.

"Hey! Keep away from me, you pukes!" Sophia said.

There were a lot of other workers there. Instead of intervening, they all backed off.

Noah saw what was going on. "Hey! Get the hell away from her!"

The two knew they were the ones with the guns. "Shut the hell up," one of the diminutive bullies said. They started to haul her off.

Noah charged them with a hoe. "Stop I said!"

One of the men turned and shot Noah. He went down to his knees.

Sophia screamed, "Noah!"

Noah tried to reached for her.

The same persecutor shot him three more times to ensure that he was dead.

The onlookers turned away. Not wanting to view the unbearable scene, and not wanting to be a witness.

Sophia screamed again.

The men took her to an outbuilding, then they beat her repeatedly with their rifle butt stocks and raped her as she tried to resist.

Afterwards, there was no inquiry after the two rapist murderer security guards reported that Noah tried to attack them. They managed to get a couple of the onlookers to corroborate the story.

Sophia could barely mange to hobble home. When the boys came home they saw her doubled over in pain with her badly bruised face. They started crying. Then she told them that their Dad had died. They were crushed and afraid.

Sophia considered taking her own life. There was nothing left for her in this world. . .except the boys. She had to get them out of Delburg. Out before they came back for her again, or hurt the boys. They had to make it back to Crawfordton.

Chapter 25

A Few Days Later, Crawfordton

The recent news from the shortwave radio was that the United States had dissolved the States. State governments were seen as archaic and an impediment to essential government function. Only the northeast was controlled by the rogue government. That

meant that all of the New England States and Mid Atlantic States were no longer in existence.

The States Rights line was holding defiantly across parts of Ohio, West Virginia and Virginia. It was the Homeland Security-United Nations Axis versus the Continental Army. The Continental Army was a coalition of many regiments such as the Ohio Confederation's Third Division. Jayden and Ella Phipps' daughter, Madison, was a drafted member of the OC 3rd Div.

Jayden was worried because he got word that the Ohio Confederation was engaged in a tough defensive action against Homeland Security at the Confederation headquarters. That explained why they could never get any help from the OC.



Rocky Smillen left his house soon after sundown and reported to the House in Crawfordton. He gave the leadership his Delburg intelligence briefing.

"People have enough food. They are eating canned food supplied by the Goldfinch Coalition in exchange for all kinds of services, including human slavery. The people are not going hungry. Since they are not starving, some are satisfied with the status quo. Most hate the regime though and many regret going there, but are afraid to give up the food. They are not allowed to have any type of firearms under penalty of death. People are murdered by the gangster private contractors who are supposed to be guarding them. People are disappearing for no apparent reason at all. Everyone is subject to Homeland Security propaganda, which promotes the legitimacy of the current President in Washington DC, and say those who oppose them are mentally ill. There are no elections and the people have no say in anything. They will shoot anyone who refuses to go along with the entire program."

Rocky continued, "They do not pay anyone for their work. Everyone is expected to work, and they tell you where and how to work. Most work on HS stolen farms, and most are lazy because there is no incentive to excel. They don't even use money in Delburg. They say that money is the root of all evil. In fact people found with money are beaten and the money taken."

Henry objected, "The scripture says 'the *love* of money is the root of all evil'! Not money itself!"

Elijah raised his eyebrows at Henry's statement.

Henry looked around at the others. "Sorry, please continue."

Rocky said, "Homeland Security says that they will supply all your needs so there is no reason for anyone to have any money except the greedy. People are doing a lot of bartering and buying with metals in an underground market though. If anyone has a complaint, and they go to the UN, the UN will run and tell Homeland who the malcontents are so they can round them up. And they have done plenty of that."

"As far as military activity, there has been an increase in the number of private contractors arriving in town. The houses are all filled up. Housing assignments seem to be by some kind of cronyism."

"I think I could expand my operations in Delburg quite a lot, but I wanted to ask you here about risking the current activity to do any of that. Also, there does not appear to be any organized medical care in Delburg whatsoever. I guess that's my report. Any questions?"

Jayden said, "Your report has been very helpful. I know things are not easy for you over there. Elijah, pay your man. Double."

Elijah plunked two silver dollars into Rocky's open hand. A hefty sum for such a short period of involvement. Rocky did not look disappointed.

Jayden told Rocky, "It's up to you if you want to develop a cell in Delburg. We are willing to pay you in relationship to whatever benefit you create for us. I don't want to lose you though, to some careless mistake."

"Understood."

Elijah added, "Maybe you should smuggle your pistol in with you this morning." He handed Rocky his pistol. "You better get going pretty soon, before daylight. Good work."

Later, Elijah and Henry went to the clinic to check on Phil. A Guardsman was outside of the door.

"I can't let you in sir, Phil is trying to rest."

Elijah was happy to hear a report that sounded like Phil was not on his deathbed.

Henry said, "Step aside. That's an order."

The guard stepped aside and they entered.

Elijah rolled his eyes at the exchange.

Both of the doctors were there. Amy was at Phil's side. Angela was at Phil's other side. Phil was sleeping and had good color.

Amy told Tammy, who was looking at Phil, "Tammy, look who's here."

Tammy glanced at Henry for an instant and diverted her eyes. "Stop it Amy." Then she looked back again at Henry. "Hi Hank."

"Hi Tammy." Henry quickly asked, "How's he doing?"

"He hurts a little," Amy said.

Phil said, "A little? What the . . ."

Amy put her index finger over Phil's lips.

Aliyah answered, "Pretty well. The pneumo. . .the draining has stopped. We did some reading, and we decided to go in and clean the pathway out with. . .um, antiseptic the best we could and just left the bullet."

"Damn harpies from hell," Phil muttered.

Amy said, "Phil, now don't be an ingrate and stop talking like that. They're here to help you. That's awful."

"Just kidding." Phil's eyes seemed to roll backward into his head and he shut them again.

Amy said, "You better be, buster. Now hush. No one wants to hear you anymore. You're terrible." She caressed his hand.

Angela held his other hand and put her head on his upper arm.

Elijah said, "Sounds like Phil is getting back to normal."

Aliyah said, "He still could get some infection, but we are giving him some wild quinine to help boost his immune system. At least we're giving it a try."

"Okay, we gotta run," Elijah said.

They went out the door.

"You know something, *Hank*? I learned something very valuable today."

"What, *E*?"

"I never knew harpies from hell were so hot."

They both got a bona fide laugh. The world seemed as if it was starting to be in order.

Elijah said, "Why don't we have Tammy over for Beefaroni tonight? You can never have enough of that." Elijah thought about his abundant supply he picked up courtesy of Goldfinch.

"That's right, E. But if you think I would have you around. . ."

Blang! Blang! Blang! The bell was ringing.

"Dang!" Elijah said.

Henry said, "We better get over to the House."

When they got to the House, they saw Ethan's horse parked at the mailbox. Jayden was at the dining room table with Ethan, sketching a map.

"Come in guys," Jayden said. "We've got a situation here."

Elijah said, "We need a *map* this time?"

"Afraid so," Jayden said. "Here's what we got. Platoon C is at the checkpoint. There is an overwhelming UN force sitting opposed to him. Kowalski's Platoon A is at the fortress." The fortress was still under construction, but provided some defense. "Opposing Platoon A is a force of their Goldfinches, along with an MRAP."

"Damn!" Elijah said. "I thought we were done with that sick crap. Son of a. . ."

"That's not all," Jayden said.

"Huh?" Henry said.

Jayden said, "Unfortunately, to the north is another force, we think LM. Murphy's Platoon D is at the north LP/OP."

"What about south?" Henry asked. "We buttoned in?"

"Don't know," Jayden said. "We already sent Angel over there to check it out. That has always been our area of neglect I'm afraid. We just never really expected much from that direction. Also, Ethan's Scouts are trying to slip through to get let our allies know what is going on. All hell could break loose any minute. I'm thinking we should commit the RPG team against the MRAP, not the VABs. "

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Elijah said, "Don't you see? That is why they are all just sitting there. They don't know where the RPG is. They are afraid that if they lose the

armor, they will lose the battle. That is why Captain LeSmurf had the balls to come here demanding it."

"All right, then," Col. Phipps said, "we hold the RPG team in reserve. I want everyone here to garrison the House, along with the RPG team.

Henry said, "Jayden. . .Colonel, I'm going to put Ella up there on that silo."

"Good Idea; if you can get her to go up there."

"Command will be upstairs, so I can get a better look at things," Colonel Phipps said. "Let's tell the town, 'cuz right now we are weak everywhere. Everyone fights for their lives."

Elijah wondered if another desperate battle could be fought. . .and won. How many lives and events had been affected by the taking of one weapon, the RPG? He dutifully went out to tell everyone, but didn't know where to start. His feet were gravitating toward the Crawfordton Medical Clinic.

"Phil, we're surrounded," Elijah said. "It looks like some major crap."

Phil started to get up. "Those bunch of. . ."

"No Phil," Amy said, trying to hold him down. "You're not well."

Elijah said, "Phil, I don't know. . ."

"You don't know *what*?" Phil groaned and got up.

Elijah sighed, "I don't know dang thing, I guess." Elijah somehow expected Phil to say the time was right for a mass evacuation. Evidently Phil did not have the same self-preservation instincts as most.

Angela tugged at Phil's arm. "No Phil." Tears were coming down from her eyes. Her breathing was interrupted by sobs as if she was starting to breathe for the first time in her life.

Amy held her hand over her own mouth. "My lil' darlin' spoke."

They all stared at Angela in amazement.

Phil gave Angela a kiss and got out of bed.

Angela tugged at him to lean down, which hurt him plenty, but he had no choice but to comply.

She whispered into his ear.

"Okay, " Phil told her. He rubbed her head.

Then Phil pulled away from them and hobbled to the door. Clearly he was still having some major pain, and had not walked in awhile. "We are going to have to do something if we want to live in a different world."

"Aliyah, you women get away from here. Go where it is safe," Elijah said.

"I will not," Aliyah said.

"Me neither," Tammy said. "We'll stay right here and be ready for whatever happens."

"Me too," Amy said.

"How come nobody ever listens to me?" Elijah shook his head and followed Phil.

The men left the Clinic. Elijah saw Todd and Kevin and told them to spread the word, the enemy had come. People were showing up at the House with their weapons. The sub-irregulars were taking their places in the fortifications dug around the house. Even people without any weapons were showing up to offer whatever help they could.



Platoon-B did a cursory recon of the immediate area south of Crawfordton. There was no sign of friend or foe. Then the sound of all sorts of munitions was popping and cracking from multiple locations behind them back to the north.

Angel was not sure where to head next, so by default he logically went straight back north to the House in Crawfordton. Angel turned around, "Okay men, let's go! On me! On me!"

Chapter 26

The Checkpoint, Midway Between Crawfordton and Delburg

"We're pinned down!" a sergeant yelled to Lieutenant Keller, trying to yell loud enough to compete with the noise of the enemy fire. Keller saw that they were totally isolated, too far from Crawfordton. It looked like they were probably going to be surrounded by an indomitable force of three United Nations VAB tactical armored fighting vehicles. There were three more vehicles visible a quarter mile farther behind the three oncoming ones.

One of the forward vehicles had beefed up armor and a turret with a 25mm cannon on it that was firing up to 400 rounds per minute at the checkpoint. The huge slugs were splattering the asphalt in front of them, and punching holes in the back of the destroyed MRAP that was half underground. Sparks, sod, and asphalt were flying in every direction.

Keller said, "We can't stay here! We're gonna die!" To make matters worse, his Platoon-C had all of the slowest men in the Guard. The oldest guys, and the not-so-athletic young guys. They had been typically kept out of the main action.

The Sergeant told Keller, "We need to surrender!"

"Go ahead and try! It's your ass!"

The Sergeant took Keller's offer under advisement and climbed out of the trench and waved to the UN force. Within a couple of seconds, his body was turned into a pink vapor.

Keller stole a glance at what the enemy was doing. They were slowly advancing while firing. Keller knew the enemy was being cautious. But even if his Keller had an RPG and even if they could hit and destroy a VAB, the other VABs would still be able to take out the shooter and the RPG threat to them would be surmounted. Keller understood this apprehension was the only thing keeping them from charging. "Men! Let's evac!"

Keller and half of his team got out of the trench to run away. They were all cut down within five yards of the trench. The remainder of the men cowered in the trench. A couple men desperately burrowed under the MRAP wreckage and covered the entrance to the burrow with more dirt to conceal their hiding spot.

The UN firing stopped. The men in the trench could hear some orders being shouted in an African sounding language. Seconds later, a couple grenades plopped into the

trench, then exploded, killing five men. The men under the destroyed MRAP lost their hearing. It was as if they were already dead and buried.

Chapter 27

The North Observation Post, Crawfordton

The two sides were trading sporadic gunfire. The scenario was similar to the battle of Dan's Hill. Except this time the enemy had multiple times greater numerical superiority. Platoon-D was still not completely rebuilt after the battle of Delburg. Another difference between this time and the last encounter was this time it was still daylight. Lieutenant Murphy felt he could hold on to the north side, but was concerned with the other platoons. All he could see of the fortress was the back side. The sound of the action over there was horrifying.

The enemy was clearly LM. Some of the LM went retro for the occasion and put their red and black back on, along with their caps. Their remaining vehicles could be seen behind them.

The LM had some kind of medium machine gun that was intermittently popping off bursts at the outpost. Neither side was willing to advance, especially Platoon-D with its new green replacement recruits. The standoff continued for what seemed like hours.

"Who's in charge here?!" Jackie said. Her spiky hair had grown out some, but now she partially shaved her head, leaving a tri-Mohawk. She had the three rows of hair spiked up. She had black war paint plastered all over her face made up to look like her head was a skull.

She was carrying a pump shotgun with a pistol grip buttstock and a pistol grip pump handle. She had spent Carlos' and her own life savings for the shotgun.

She wore an unthinkable bright red T-shirt with the sleeves ripped off and her signature tight black pants. Among her accessories was a bandolier loaded with more shotgun shells. She also had a green army-issue belt with that had a machete hanging from it.

"I'm lieutenant Murphy."

"I'm here to kill some Latin Mafia." Her looks could not be taken lightly. "They murdered my parents. Now I will get revenge."

Murphy said, "Right now there is not much we can do against them."

"Bullpuckey." She turned toward the enemy and took a deep breath. She started screaming a barrage of F-bombs, F-cruise missiles, and continued the shock and awe with all types of F-weapons of mass destruction.

A bullet hit the fortification right in front of her and they all hit the deck.

Murphy said, "You better calm down, F-Girl, or you won't get a chance to do anything."

"Fine," she said, "but I am not playing around here."

"I can see that. We can all use whatever help we can get. Just dial it back a little. For now."

Jackie sat with her back against the fortifications stewing and brewing. "Revenge is all I got," she muttered. It was apparent that she was visualizing the battle ahead. "Stupid stupid Carlos."

"Lieutenant! Look over there!" a Sergeant said.

"Let me see your field glasses. Whaaaaat?" Murphy and Platoon-D thought they had travelled back in time. "You know what that looks like?" Murphy asked.

Jackie jumped up to look.

"Yea," the Sergeant said, "it looks like. . .a Civil War infantry unit, Sir."

Civil War era Billy Yanks came out of the forest, facing the LM's flank in a double row formation. These reenactors had morphed from play-war acting hobbyists, into a paramilitary unit. The anachronistic scene was surrealistic. Those who did not have the complete uniform, including the kepi, were dressed in civilian clothes for the period with their wide brim hats. All that was missing was the 35-star flag bearer and a drummer boy.

"They're not acting," Lt. Murphy said. "They've got semi-auto weapons, and they are executing a 'mad minute'. . . or longer." Murphy asked whoever would listen, "So those guys are Confederation Yankees? That's a hoot."

The bluecoats were pouring on the firepower. The yanks took some casualties but held their lines. The morale of the LM was breaking as some of them were seen to be fleeing.

"Charge!" Murphy yelled.

Jackie chambered a shell into her shotgun. "Move, you slugs!" Jackie screamed.

The Guardsmen were like bugs that had spent so long in the glass jar they had no concept of leaving once the lid was off.

Murphy commanded, "I said *move*! Right now! *Chaaaaaarge*!"

Jackie led the charge toward the pinned down LM. "Let's go!"

A couple of the Guardsmen were hit on the way.

"Keep moving!" Murphy yelled. "Charge!"

Crawfordton Guard, Platoon-D moved double-quick the 300 or so yards toward the LM. The pinned down LM was numerically superior, to Platoon-D and the Billys combined, but the LM had lost the initiative. The rout was on. All of the LM were trying to get away. Many were throwing down their weapons, but all were running for their lives in all directions. The scattering locusts were taking casualties from the Union lookalikes at a torrid pace.

Jackie screamed like a banshee as she approached the LM well ahead of the others. She fired a blast from her shotgun at one of the braver looking members of the LM. Then pumped the gun again and fired from the hip at point blank range at another gangbanger mercenary who was turning from the bluecoats to shoot at her.

When Platoon-D was close to the LM position, Lt. Murphy commanded, "Get them! Fire at will! Get them all! No prisoners! Take their weapons!" Murphy looked to the right at the blue ghost army that was going back into the woods, dragging with them their casualties, leaving the mop-up to the home team. The Latin Mafia aka Liberation Militia, would never be the same.

Jackie was looking around while she joined the chase. She saw Antonio, who was running away. She sprinted toward him. Even though she had already just been on a run, she started catching up to him with ease.

The one-eared leader of the LM heard her footsteps. He stopped and held his hand up. "I surrender! Don't shoot!"

She casually walked up to him. "I'm not going to shoot you." With one motion she pulled the machete from her left side with her right hand and slashed at Antonio.

He jumped back as the blade swooshed within an inch of his neck. Antonio put his hands back down and assumed a defensive position. Then he pulled Mo's butterfly knife from his pocket. "You had your chance, stupid girl." Once it was open he lunged toward Jackie.

She jumped back, dropping the machete. Mo lunged at her again with the knife. Then she blasted him with the shotgun with the barrel up against his belly. The butterfly knife slashed Jackie's face and arm. Antonio fell to the ground experiencing a slow, painful death.

Jackie knew she was cut. She self-examined the wounds and saw that there was some moderate bleeding. It would be best if she broke off the pursuit and returned to the Clinic for treatment.

Chapter 28

The Fortress, Crawfordton

"We're losing too many men!" a Platoon-A Guardsman shouted to Lt. Kowalski.

"Keep your heads down!" Kowalski ordered.

What the half-built fortress lacked in technical design, it made up for in sheer mass. Heavy timbers provided superior protection against small arms. One of the blockhouses was mostly complete. It provided protection from all sides and the top. There was not a lot of light in it.

Among Platoon-A, was a three-man cadre of Ohio Militia Engineers who were leading the Fortress construction project. This live-fire situation gave the Engineers a chance to evaluate the project, if they survived the attack.

Armed with a .50 cal machine gun, the Homeland Security version MRAP had been hitting Guardsmen between logs with precision accuracy. Meanwhile, the enemy was advancing. Whenever any of the defenders were able to steal a look to see how many attackers there were, they would see even more.

Attempts were made to shoot out the bullet resistant front windows of the MRAP, without success. If any of the hits left a mark on the windows, you couldn't see it from where they were shooting from. Several gangbanger mercenaries were popping out from either side of the vehicle to shoot a few rounds, then popped back. While these were tempting targets, the result was the Guardsmen watching them were even better targets, and acquired risk-free for the CROWS operator. It looked as if there would soon be point-blank shooting and perhaps hand to hand combat inside the bunker. Either way, the Guard's prospects were not good. It might be prudent to retreat and save the lives of the small number of men that he had left.

Then the machine gun fire stopped. Kowalski figured the CROWS had run out of ammo, or targets. He took a quick look. Then he did a doubletake. Murphy figured out that one of the Shanesville snipers managed to place a bullet into the two inch diameter camera lens on the CROW system from their position in the woods. The Confederation Engineer called the shot "A commendable bit of marksmanship". The whole lens was broken out of the housing, leaving a cavity. The operator might as well be watching a rerun of *Gilligan's Island*. "Return fire!" Kowalski ordered.

The several remaining men garrisoning the fortress were suppressing the mercenaries into a less aggressive posture, but nevertheless still advancing. There were far too many of them.

Kowalski commanded, "Don't let them in! Don't waste ammunition!" They could not let the fortress fall.

"Sir! They are firing into the woods! Reinforcements are here!"

Kowalski took a glance. "Yea. . .I know that guy. . .Yea, those are Shanesville guys."

The Shanesville Raiders were firing from the same woodlot as the War Between the States reenactors, but from the south side. The Goldfinch mercenaries were forced to pull back to regroup against the Raiders. In time, the mercenaries pulled back even further to a point that resulted in a stalemate.

Chapter 29

The House, Crawfordton

The Command Headquarters was in the upstairs of the House. There were boxes of stuff stored all over, leaving the room crowded. The panoramic sounds of gunfire was unnerving.

Jayden told Elijah and Phil, "I don't know how we are hanging on. Yet we are routing the LM to the north, and holding off the Goldfinch Coalition to the east. We lost Keller at the west checkpoint. The UN is there picking up weapons. I don't know what they will do next. Angel came back from the south and said he didn't see anything."

They heard loud footsteps coming up the stairs. It was Ethan Mentzer and his big cowboy boots.

"The Smurfs are coming from the southwest," Ethan said.

A loud explosion went off outside the House.

"They've got artillery!" Elijah said.

Jayden looked outside. A smoking two foot wide hole was in the roof of the vacant Thomas house across the road.

Another round hit. The ground shook.

"Ethan! Your Scouts are the only ones left!" Jayden said, "ride out and find out where that is coming from!"

"Grab your weapon, Elijah! Let's go down and fight!"

More rounds were dropping in various places, sprouting fountains of dirt and leaving scattered shards of shanties.

Elijah and Jayden joined Henry and Angel in one of the trenches in the front yard. Irregulars had taken refuge in several other trenches.

Ethan's scouts rode to the south to escape the embattled perimeter of Crawfordton. They spotted four UN VABS motoring toward Crawfordton from the southwest. The remaining two VAB units of the UN armored company were stopped a quarter mile behind. The Scouts quickly realized the indirect fire was coming from a UN vehicle, a VPM 81 Mortar Carrier version of the VAB. It carried an 81mm mortar, firing through an opening in the roof. The other VAB had huge red crosses on it.

"Stay here!" Ethan commanded. "Hyah!" He whipped his horse and went straight for the mortar. He made it all the way to the VPM 81. Like a cowboy, he leaped from his horse with a pistol in one hand and a blade in the other. Then, like a Viking, he went headlong into the mortar opening to the vehicle. Taking the mortar crew by surprise, he shot three of the Rwandan Defense Force soldiers. The remaining soldiers inside the vehicle were trying to simultaneously get away and resist the attack. Ethan kept reaching inside the VPM and shooting and slashing with the blade. Then he got an easy shot on the spooked driver who came out of the driver's side door.

A hailstorm of small arms fire hit the passenger's side of the VPM 81. Ethan rolled off of the VPM on the driver's side to avoid being shot and hit the ground on his side with a thud.

The gunfire was the other Scouts who had fired upon a UN-RDF soldier who came out of the passenger's side. He was preparing to shoot Ethan in the back before he was dropped.

The medical VAB was already on a direct course back to Delburg.

The other four VABs were already approaching the southern edge of Crawfordton. There was no one to stop them from making their way to the House. They blazed a trail through shanties. between houses. The front vehicle was the unit with the 25mm cannon turret and enhanced armor. Three other standard VABs followed through the blazed trail.

Captain Kamanzi's voice came over a loudspeaker on the Command VAB. "Surrender now, and you will not be hurt. If you keep fighting, you will die."

The loudspeaker was summarily shot out.

As they got within 100 yards of the House, the UN armored group started firing upon it. The 25mm cannon sent siding flying off of the house as dotted lines of holes were punched into the House. Windows were shattered. It seemed that the upper floor might collapse under the onslaught.

Then several unarmed women old enough to be grandmothers were laying in wait in their trench on an unsuspecting VAB. They popped up and tossed improvised blobs-of-Phil's-leftover-paint-in-a-Wal-Mart-bag devices upon the VAB with the Dragar turret. Red, white, green, and hillbilly chrome were plastered all over the vehicle as they sometimes successfully hit the windows.

Henry shouted, "Hit the small window on the turret!"

One of the women realized that they would probably never be able to direct a Wal-Mart bag of paint with enough precision to cover the small window at the top of the turret. She hopped up on the side of the VAB and slam dunked a nice coat of caution yellow on the window. She was shot in the calf by gunfire from another VAB, then again in the side. The turret immediately stopped firing. The bleeding woman dived off of the multicolored VAB and rolled back into the foxhole to commence her screaming.

The paint assaulted VAB windshield wipers went on. This smeared the paint uniformly, but the multicolored smear was still impossible to see through. Soon the vehicle personnel had lost track of the outside world. They started to open the side portals covered with heavy steel plates.

Meanwhile Tim Crawford was at the side of another VAB. He grabbed a piece of wire mesh fence he had dug up before the attack that still had the posts on it. He jammed one of the end posts up into a wheel well. As the wheel turned, the VAB became more entangled.

Sssssssshoooooshhh. . .Kathoom! The RPG team put a hit upon another of the VABs. The back door opened and a couple of RDF soldiers came out. Platoon-B ended any aspirations the Rwandans had of escaping with a short burst of fire.

Tim Crawford became entangled in this own trap. The fence snagged his arm and was wrapping around him. He tried to free himself, then his other arm was trapped.

"No!" Phil screamed as he witnessed his brother facing imminent death. Phil tried to make his way out of the trench but did not have full use of his arms to pull himself out. But there was more to his incapacity than just pain. It was as if Angela had power over him. She spoke a word into his ear and he was possessed. He had to survive the battle; for her.

They couldn't watch as Tim was precariously tangled up in the fence, furiously trying to break free of the tangle.

Jayden made his move to go out of the trench to help Tim, which would have led him into direct enemy fire, but Henry pulled him back down. There was nothing to be done.

The VAB with the fence now had Tim wrapped around the wheel. The VAB was trying to go forward and reverse, rocking back and forth. Tim was soon pulled closer and closer, tighter and tighter into the wheel until his bones were crushed beyond all recognition. The vehicle spun sideways because of the drag of the trap and slipped sideways into a foxhole crushing Tim and another civilian, while trapping a couple more. The back door of that VAB was trapped shut, limiting the options of the crew to a

tedious evacuation out of the top or driver's door. They chose to stay put, safely inside of the steel cocoon.

The Command VAB came up the driveway and was firing directly into the trenches. The paint bag women were all pulverized by Command crew members' automatic gunfire out of side portals. They slammed the portal covers shut with a clank.

Elijah watched as the Command vehicle started to pull forward in the driveway. Elijah knew the next target would be them.

"Ready to fire!" Jayden alerted. They could only get a shot into the armored vehicle when the portals opened. "I got number 1!"

"Number Two!" Henry said.

"Number Three!" Elijah said.

Phil said, as the portal covers were opening, "Number. . ."

KA-RA-SHHHH! It happened so fast it took everyone by surprise. The Command vehicle had been rammed forward through the garage door by a bigger and heavier and much uglier armored car at top speed. It was rammed so hard that the two steel beasts went through the garage door, piles of stuff in the garage, and halfway out of the back wall like a baby freight train.

"Rata!" Elijah screamed.

Cheers went throughout the Crawfordtonians

Elijah, Henry and Jayden got out of the trench and ran into the garage. Elijah and Henry started firing their pistols into the opened side portals of the Command VAB, which promptly were shut.

Angel ran by the command vehicle assault in the garage. "Excuse me," he said, running by them and out of the garage with a sledgehammer. He ran to the VAB that had the windows painted up, and started thumping with the sledge on the paint covered bullet resistant windshield. He pounded and pounded and it only seemed to scratch and dent a little.

Carlos got out of the passenger's side of Rata's armored car and took Angel's sledgehammer. The beast of a man took a full swing and bashed the window of the painted VAB with an immense bash. On the third such bash the plastic window started to cave in. Before any further action was taken, RDF Troops opened side portals and were exchanging fire with Platoon-B. The RPG fire team held their RPG up so they

Rwandans could see it, and they soon surrendered. They threw their weapons out of the back door and cautiously crept out.

Captain Gahiji Kamanzi popped the top of the Command Vehicle and announced, "We surrendering! Don' shoot!" The back end of the Command Vehicle was blocked by the hulking mass of Rata's armored car. Kamanzi and the crew came out through the top, one by one.

Jayden grabbed Gahiji by the back of his collar and told him, "I ought to execute all of you, for what you did to those women."

"Dis ees only war," Kamanzi said. "Eet ees inevitable that you will have to give up your guns and live under US Homeland Security regulations."

Jayden let go of Kamanzi and said, "You got it wrong, war criminal. It is inevitable that we will live free. We have no concept of losing. People like you come and go, but we will never ever give up in a million years. It's just a matter of how many people you are willing to lose before *you* give up. Now get your stupid blue hats out of here before I get really mad and change my mind!"

The UN troops who survived from all the vehicles were sent back to Delburg in humiliation without weapons or vehicles.

Angel and his platoon went to the check out the other locations.

Rata debarked his wrecked armored car and hobbled into the garage. "Damn. That was a helluva crash, man." He doubled over in pain and went down to one knee. He watched some of the Rwandans walk directly by him.

Henry told Rata, "You want to go to the Clinic?"

"Never mind that. . . dude, you owe me a new car," Rata said. "I'll take that other painted up 'un' that you got over there."

"Un?" Henry asked.

"For real man, U. N. spells 'un'." With some help, Rata stood up.

"I've got a truck hidden away in a barn you may like better," Henry said.

Rata shook his index finger. "No way man. I heard about that hunk of crap from Jackie. I want the colored one."

"Yea, well anyways it's all yours, whatever you want," Henry said. "Sure you still want it though? The driver's side window is no good."

"I think I'll have Carlos start driving for me. No problem."

Henry said, "According to our weapon capture customs, that seems fair enough, but if they see you tooling around with a 25mm cannon, they will come after you with a tank or helicopter or something."

"You know it man! That thing will really be bad ass."

Henry told Rata, "I'll just say one more thing; You have to be careful about taking heavy weapons from someone."

Elijah stared at Henry without expression.

"We're gonna clean it out first though," Jayden said, upon overhearing the exchange. "There's probably a lot of essentials in there we need. We're going to have to leave those vehicles in place so Phil doesn't lose his whole garage. He's got solar panels on the roof of the garage."

"What?" Rata said, "Then I gotta clean out my car first, unless you wanna trade for what's inside my car."

"No thanks."

"Let's make a deal."

"Not interested," Jayden said. "You can pick your stuff up tomorrow."

Elijah knew there had been numerous other heroic acts, and possibly many more by so many others had taken place. He asked Rata, "So what made you come over here to be the hero?"

" 'Again', you mean? Someone has to save your sorry ass. It's what I do, bro. Nobody told me that this is our home now and we should defend it."

Rata's sub-ordinary looks did not match anyone's image of a hero, but they were all starting to believe he was the ultimate hero.

The fragile morale of those attacking the Fortress was broken when reinforcements arrived from the other areas. The MRAP and the Goldfinch militiamen broke away in retreat.

The Medical Clinic was slammed with a deluge of casualties. Among those in line were a couple of Rwandans whose injuries were not life threatening. They spoke no English. No one showed them any disrespect.

The Shanesville Raiders and the 119th Ohio Volunteer Infantry celebrated with the Crawfordton Guard over the victory. But it was a bittersweet victory that cost the lives of many of their fellow heroic citizens.

Elijah and Phil went back to the Clinic to check in.

Amy got up and moved as close to Phil as she could without aggravating his injury. Angela moved next to Phil on the other side.

Amy said, "Phil, what did Angela say to you?"

Angela tugged on Phil's arm. Phil knew that it meant not to reveal anything.

"Sorry Babe, but Angela has sworn me to secrecy on the matter. I cannot discuss it."

"Phil. I'm your wife. We are supposed to share everything."

"I expect my wife to help me to do the right thing which is to keep the secret, not badger me to give it up."

Amy turned to Angela. "Angela, don't you want to tell me the secret?"

Angela shook her head.

Amy got close to Angela. "Can you tell me anything, li'l darlin'?"

Angela stared at Amy. Her lips were quivering.

"What do you want to tell me, darlin'?"

She stared a little while longer, then said, "I . . . love you."

Amy hugged her and squeezed her tight. "I love you too. Bless your sweet little heart."

Phil said, "That good enough for you, Babe?"

"Yes. Yes its plenty good enough." Amy wanted to cry her eyes out. Amy had a lot of pent-up anxiety. She had gone all of this time without hearing a word, from or about her birth-children.

Phil felt that today was a good day in Angela's progression. Angela was so withdrawn from everyone because of her past, she did not even want anyone to know her real name, which is "Ayanna". Phil knew if he told anyone, at least this soon, that she might consider it another reason why not to trust anyone. Phil also knew that if he died in the battle, her most trusted lifeline to the rest of the world would be cut off.

Rocky Smillen brought a Delburg update to Crawfordton. He said the defensive military presence in Delburg was now minimal. Homeland Security and the UN chose to move their assets to more strategic locations. All that was left were some Goldfinch

Coalition, who controlled it. Also, he found out that a faction from Delburg applied to get their town into the Ohio Confederation, but their application was rejected.

Jayden was pleased with the decision and said, "Evidently Colonel Wilcox knows more about the kind of folk there than we thought."

Chapter 30

The next day, Elijah said, "Maybe things are calming down now. Maybe people can find each other."

"You mean, like your daughter," Henry said.

"Yea. I'm going south. I have to. I never got anything back from my letter, but it's my responsibility, you know. I'll leave tomorrow; early."

"You're crazy, E."

"I must be. I followed your stupid self around for 10 years. Okay, more than that now."

They looked at each other, realizing they may never see each other again. They hugged.

Henry asked, "What about Aliyah?"

"She's going to stay here. This is our home now. I do plan to come back, you know. What about Tammy?"

"What about her?"

"Come on man! Wake up! The whole town is talkin' like you are going to pop the question any day now."

"I am?"

"You need to."

"Maybe I do need to."

"We ain't gonna live forever you know. It's not all about fighting the baddies, you know. Anyhow, you know that medic from Shanesville? The guy who has a full head of hair?"

"Yea, what of him?" Henry asked.

"Well, I hear around town that he has quite a thing for Tammy."

"Oh?"

Elijah realized that he was being a small town gossip. Another experience he would have never thought that he would have. "Yea, in fact she, as rumor has it, is a little fond of him as well."

"Really. Is that a fact?"

"Oh yes. Tammy is not very talkative, as you know, so she might be waiting for someone to make the first move."

"Well. . .What if I ask and she says 'no'."

"Then maybe she will invite you to her wedding with the handsome dude from Shanesville. You are good friends with her right? Maybe you can be maiden of honor. Or what if she says 'yes'?"

Henry looked into the sky. "You know, I don't think I can find a single thing wrong with her saying 'yes'. Stay here, there is something I want to get for you." He went back into the house and came out with a bag. Henry handed Elijah a bag of money. "Here is your half of what I got for selling the RPG to the Guard."

"Nice. Holding out on me, huh? I never knew you got anything for it," Elijah said.

"Oh yea, the house really is half yours. You paid for it."

In a few days, the people of Crawfordton were trying to pick up the pieces from the destruction of the battle. Many, fearing reprisal, decided to pack up and leave for less brown grass.

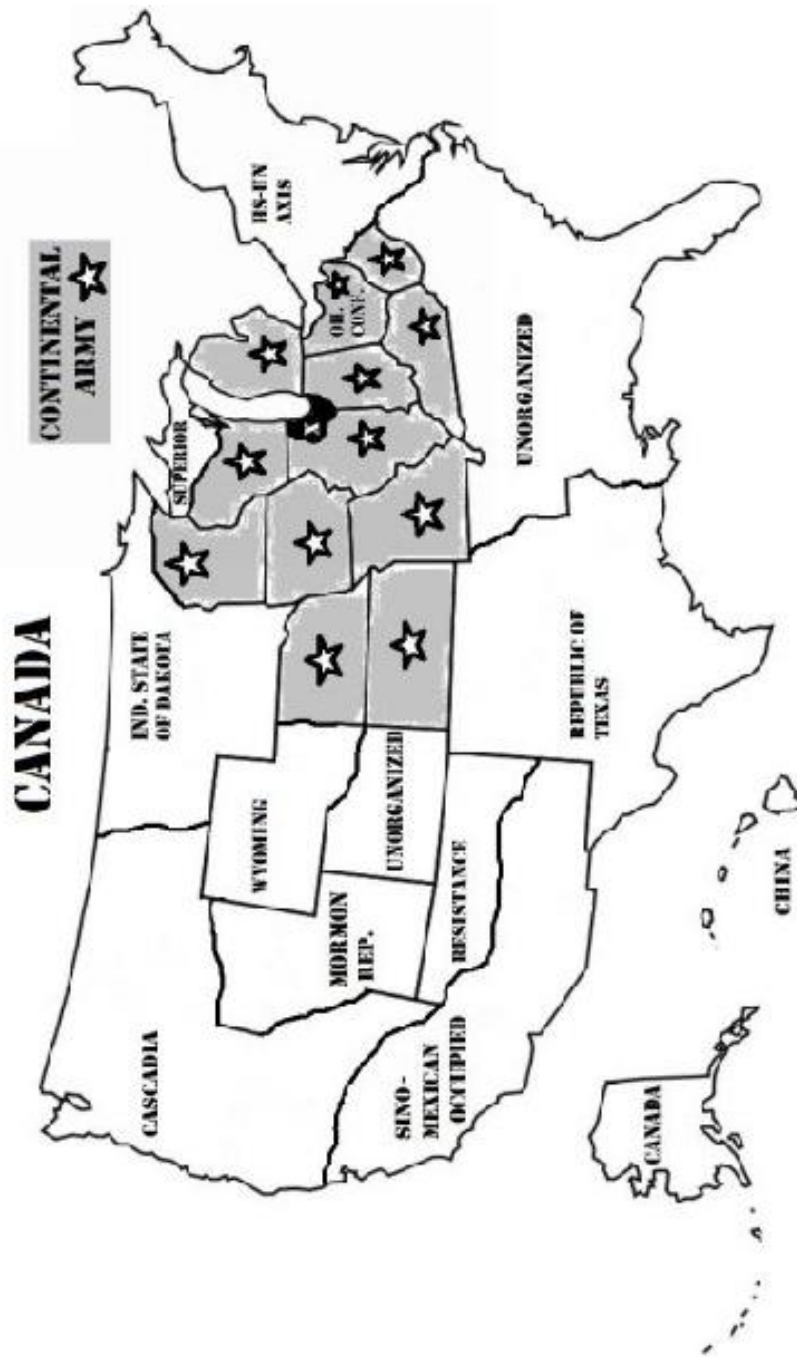
Elijah said goodbye to Aliyah who returned to her house and wailed in bed as if Elijah was already dead. Elijah left with whatever provisions he could carry. Something inside him said the decision to go on the journey to Cincinnati was right. He could feel it. Aliyah felt just the opposite.

Elijah would have plenty of time on foot to ponder his crazy mixed up life. Maybe the last time he had reflected so intensely had been in the parking lot of the precinct, which seemed eons ago.

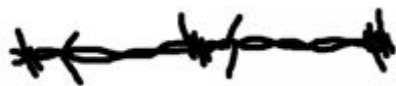
You work and work and do everything right. You sacrifice for everyone else and get no breaks. What do you get for it? What is your earthly reward? Where is your honor among men? If there were honor, it would be forgotten. You can't buy your way into Heaven with deeds, including dying for your country. Only Jesus is in the soul saving business.

But the singular answer to the seeming futility of a sacrificial life could no longer be denied. Your reward is that you and God have the eternal self-awareness that you were one of the few who gave their entire life to take care of your own people; your friends; your family, and were definitely. . .*definitely* one of the good people, now and for all time.

THE END



AYANNA



Chapter 1

Crawfordton, Ohio

November

It was like Angela and Ayanna were two completely different little girls.

Angela was taught by her adopted parents to be considerate of others, to always tell the truth, and to love Jesus, her Savior. Now she was surrounded by kind and selfless people. If Angela would not have had those caring folks, especially Amy and Phil, in her life, she could not have lasted a day on her own. Even though Angela had such good examples for caretakers, Angela was filled with latent anger and hostility. Her aggression was beyond mere moodiness. Her enmity with the world was not just some occasional irritability, but an abnormal opposition to everything and everyone.

Ayanna was dark, brooding, and silent. Ayanna had been exposed to the worst kinds of evil imaginable. Ayanna did not participate directly the murderous actions of her clan. She saw and did things that no child, or even an adult should ever have seen or done. Now with her new family, she was surrounded by people who she sometimes blamed for killing her parents. She was not completely sure if they would yet kill her because of her past.

Other children in the neighborhood called Ayanna the "Zombie Princess". The verbal torments were frequent reminders of the hostility others in the Community had for her. Ayanna had grown up confused by what was right and wrong. She wanted to be a good girl, but saw no examples of any good little girls to follow.

Angela and Ayanna were names given to the same confused little girl. She was born Ayanna. Everyone who knew her as Ayanna was dead, except for Phil. She told Phil that her real name was "Ayanna" in confidence. Ayanna felt a bond with Phil unlike anyone else. Phil was old enough to be her grandfather. Phil saw Ayanna as a top priority in his eyes. He was the only one who would give her the unvarnished truth. Ayanna was always trying to parse what the real meaning was behind what was being told to her by cryptic adults. After all, Angela had lived seven hard years with the last couple being horrific. Angela wasn't a baby anymore and sought after some straight talk.

Ayanna was dubbed "Angela" only because she refused to speak to her new caretakers, and they had no clue what her given name was. Ayanna was rescued by the man who they called "Angel" because of his spiritual nature. So Amy, Phil's wife, named her Angela. If it wasn't for Angel, she would be dead, but if it wasn't for his military involvement against her parents' clan, they would be alive.

Angel was the leader of the Crawfordton Guard Platoon who wiped out Angela-Ayanna's cannibalistic clan. But he refused to let anything happen to her, while his men wanted her left to fend for herself.

The residents of the house where she now lived were all seated at the dinner table in the darkened room. There had been no electric power for a couple of years and the windows were boarded up with scavenged constituent bits of shanties leftover from the Battle.

"Angela," Phil said at the dinner table. "You with us here?"

She nodded her head yes. She always sat next to Phil at the large dining room table, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

Angela only recently started speaking to certain people. Then it was only in single words or sentence fragments. Phil was the exception. She would converse with Phil.

There was not much to eat after two years of total collapse of the US economy that included all out selfishness and violence. But Phil would praise God for anything they had to eat every single day. Today dinner was some soup made by Amy with some squirrel broth. The soup *du jour* had some sliced up turnips in it along with a couple of carrots. Some green onions and garlic were added for more taste.

Angela-Ayanna had lived at the Crawford house for about a year.

Phil and Amy Crawford had adult children of their own, but they were unable to have any contact with them since the United States fell apart, including all of the transportation and communication infrastructure. Now Amy and Phil lived in the town of Crawfordton, which had sprung up around Phil Crawford, because of his masterful leadership during the onset of the crisis. So the town was named "Crawfordton" after him.

Although Phil was not liked by many, he had the know-how and the drive to help everyone around him do their best to survive. A relatively stable micro-economy had sprung up around Phil and his friends who lived in the House. Soon their rural housing development, turned into a settlement for many displaced people, and many moved in and the result was the growing shanty town of Crawfordton.

Crawfordton was part of the Ohio Confederation. The Confederation was an irregular-shaped area about a third of the size of the original US State of Ohio. The Confederation was part of the large Continental Army Alliance. The Continental Army had been at war with the Homeland Security-UN Axis. The conflict had presently cooled off for a respite. But the unresolved festering tension behind the war had not been resolved in the least.

Crawfordtonians tried to normalize their lives as much as possible. They tried to seize every opportunity to improve all aspects of their lives.

With Phil's help, Amy ran the local public school. They tried to individualize the curriculum to each student. Angela was on a super fast-track of learning, with Phil as her mentor. If a subject was important to Phil, Angela thought, then it must be worthwhile to learn.

Angela knew a lot about politics and military science for a seven year-old. Much of her awareness of these topics were because the Crawford's House was the Constabulary of Crawfordton. There was plenty of interesting talk to be overheard on a nearly daily basis. Amy always tried to get Angela to play with boring dolls, instead of her plastic soldiers. Since Angela rarely spoke, she had been overlooked by military officers preoccupied with their sensitive discussions as a security risk.

Instead of being a kid, Phil would feed Angela stories about how the real world worked. She loved it because it was all secret between her and Phil. Amy would have had constant fits if she knew the diverse and distasteful adult-world topics Phil was telling Angela.

Angela returned to slurping on her soup. Phil gave her the "I know your real name is Ayanna" wink. She loved it every time, since it was a secret only Phil and her knew. And Angela was comforted knowing that her wishes of confidentiality were being observed by Phil.

Jayden Phipps, the Constable and leader of the local Guard and his wife also Ella lived at the House. They were okay people, Angela thought. Angela didn't say too much to them, and that was how they treated her.

Logan "Angel" Howard also lived in the house. He liked wearing his do-rag. After Amy committed to taking care of Angela, Angel no longer wanted the responsibility and became pretty much hands off with Angela's care.

Wesley Crawford also lived at the house. Wesley was Phil's nephew. He was in his late 30s, so like most all of the other men, had a full beard and long hair. Wesley was at the scene when Angela was brought back from the woods. Wesley was totally

against Angel bringing her back, and particularly against her living in the house. There was no way Angela was going to forget that one. She despised Wesley and saw him as an enemy.

Angela sneered at Wesley, who was slurping his soup and stopped to munch on the root vegetables. Wesley had that gross hand on his spoon that had the finger shot off. Too bad it wasn't his whole head. Wesley didn't see Angela glaring at him with daggers coming out of her eyes.

"Angela," Amy said. Trying to disrupt her obviously hateful mood. "You get enough to eat?"

She shrugged her shoulders. There was not much point since they didn't have much food anyways.

Amy picked up the soup pan. There was a little bit left in it.

Amy said, "Here Phil, pour the rest into her bowl there."

Angela didn't refuse it, but never asked for it so she stubbornly thought she did not owe anyone a "thank you".

As Constable, Colonel Jayden Phipps was the de facto leader of the burg. He looked at Phil with a smile. "The Ohio Confederation is sending two more platoons to the fort."

"Nice," Phil said.

The Confederation had finally finished building the heavy fortress on the north side of Crawfordton. The wall of the Fort enclosed a huge area, about half the area of a football field.

Jayden added, "The Fort construction crew came over here to the House, they secured the garage so it didn't collapse when they pulled out the wrecked armored vehicles. Then they took those big steel boxes and incorporated them into the Fort design. That damn thing is one thick skinned son of a . . ."

"Jayden," Amy said. "I'm out of soup."

"Thank you," he said, reminding himself that Amy wanted to keep the vernacular clean.

Ella chuckled. They all got a chuckle.

Wesley said, "I'd like to see those Gofinns mess with us now!" "Gofinns" was the slang name given to the fascist Goldfinch Coalition, who were founded upon killing and

stealing. "If they try anything, they'll be wiped out."

Angela sneered at Wesley again and said, "You're stupid!"

Wesley quickly looked at Angela in surprise.

"Angela!" Amy said. Amy hated to stop her from speaking because it was so rare of an occurrence. "Why did you say that? Say something nice."

Angela looked at Amy. Angela said, "Now the Axis bastards will just send a bigger army here."

"Phil!" Amy said, looking at him.

"What?!" Phil looked surprised, "I didn't tell her that."

Amy huffed. "Maybe not, but you are the cause of it! What little girl talks like that?"

No one chuckled this time.

Phil stopped slurping and stared as if he was looking into his soup for a sign. The others realized that Phil had taken the substance of Angela's words seriously.

Amy was still going on about the rough language. "This poor child will never have a chance to live like a normal little girl. What if she talks like that at school, or outside? Phil, you've got to stop it."

Phil said, "God help us if she is right."

Chapter 2

Sidney, Ohio

It was early morning. Elijah had just came out of an abandoned car he slept in, that was left in the middle of the southbound side of Interstate-75. Elijah walked southbound down a four-lane highway that once was a continual river of car and truck traffic, flowing in unison like a massive moving parking lot.

Those days were gone. Now the freeway was quiet. There was no traffic, because the gas had long ago ran out. Even if there were some gas, the road was blocked with thousands of abandoned vehicles. By now most were inoperable. If the vehicles were not burned out, then there was typically a hole punched in the bottom of the drained out gas tank. There was a period of time when gas became completely unavailable, that people would kill to get just to get a gallon.

Looking back on those extremely violent days, what did it gain the killers? Those who they killed, often innocent, died a horrible violent death. Meanwhile, the killers were able to live a little while longer. Their ill-gotten gain was probably soon squandered just to make their murderous life a little less problematic for a short while.

Marauders were still out there. Everywhere; and Elijah knew it. Thieves and killers were always watching. That is all they had to do with their time. Look for someone to kill, rob, and perhaps, to eat.

Surveying the road up ahead, Elijah pondered whether to continue on, or hide out until nightfall. The road was elevated compared to the built-up city on both sides of the road. He would be clearly visible on both sides of the road. If he chose to walk on the far side of the road, he may only be visible on that side.

Elijah knew how it would be if he hid out. He had done it before. He would lay around all day tormented by boredom and hunger. He knew that if he chose to lay under a car or in a culvert then he would be arguing with himself all day which was worse; boredom, or death.

Elijah had provisions in his backpack that his friend, "Angel" had prepared for him, but the pack was intentionally packed light. The load was heavy enough with all of the

extra water he packed. The quantity of provisions were at best only good for a one-way trip down to Cincinnati, which was the goal.

Back when all of the trouble really started to get serious, Elijah and his wife, Aliyah, wanted to leave Detroit, and go to Cincinnati. In fact, Cincinnati was going to be their retirement destination all along, even before the trouble. They wanted to go there, because Cincy was where their daughter, Rene, and her husband Matt lived. If only they had left for Cincinnati a day sooner, because they never made it.

The Dollar became worthless and the wheels totally fell off of the economy. The complex economic system started to unravel, with no one left on the payroll to fix it. People started running out of gas. They abandoned their cars in the middle of the busiest highways because they had to. So more cars were blocked on the road with no way out.

The cities became enveloped in violence. People who lived under the notion that they were to be taken care of by government felt as if they "deserved" food, a comfortable home, and all creature comforts, on the basis that they simply didn't have any of it. These needs were seen as an entitlement that would be vigorously pursued, even if they had to use violence to take from all of the other have-nots. The days of depending upon government were over.

So they Elijah and Aliyah, along with their friend, Henry, were running out of gas back then and had to stop somewhere, they wound up in a little place called Crawfordton. It was supposed to be a one night emergency visit, but the night turned into a sojourn, which turned into a permanent residence.

Then Elijah, Aliyah, and Henry got caught up in various armed conflicts and war. The wars started out as a million tribes in the US who were killing each other just for the chance to try to survive on things not being made any more. Now many of the clans were consolidating into larger, but still weak and untrustworthy factions.

Most Americans had perished in all of the violence before they had a chance to starve to death. Those who remained were those who were either of a strong breed, or exceedingly evil, willing to violate any taboo.

The most intolerable thing to Elijah was that Aliyah was still there, back in Crawfordton. Elijah knew that everyone thought his journey south to Cincinnati was pure folly. In his head he could not mentally argue with them. His heart, his love for his daughter, said "go on".

If they could have just travelled a couple of more hours in the car. . .

Elijah noticed a man up ahead walking on the road. The man clearly had seen him. The guy was wearing a coat and. . . some kind scarf on his face. Was this some guy a lone bandit? Elijah reasoned that bandits did not need to hide their identity since there was not much in the way of law enforcement for any bandit to worry about.

The guy up ahead was also carrying a rifle. But being armed only made him normal. Elijah could see the guy in the distance, and realized that when he compared the man's position to an abandoned car along the road, they were walking in the same direction, at roughly the same speed.

Maybe if there was trouble up ahead, the scarf guy would run into it first. So maybe it would be good to keep a fair distance, to stay away from predators, or perhaps even the scarf guy.

This tactic continued for what seemed like a couple of hours. They were both walking at about the same pace. The road was warming up in the sun and felt good on the old, tired feet. But each step forward was another one that would have to be taken to get back.

There was a cluster of cars up ahead in the middle of the road. Scarf guy was just walking in among them. It would take five minutes or so for Elijah to progress to that point.

Elijah thought of the reports he had gotten from the area directly south long before he left on the journey. The stories were sobering. It seemed the chances of Rene and Matt being alive was fairly remote. Was he throwing his life aw. . .

"You lookin' for me mister!?" It was scarf guy pointing a gun at Elijah's face.

Elijah froze in place and tried to catch his breath. "Not really."

"Well, it seems like you've been following me pretty close for the longest time."

"We're just going the same way, friend."

"How do I know you're a friend?"

"How else would you expect me to talk, given the gun and all."

"At least you are honest about that."

"C'mon man, you aren't carrying anything. You're not much of a target to rob. On the other hand, you do look like a robber to me."

"If I was a robber, you'd be robbed."

"So, you're not a robber?"

The man moved closer.

"Easy now," Elijah said.

"Shut up and keep your hands up!" He moved even closer, wary of Elijah having a weapon.

Elijah didn't warn him again. But Elijah didn't grab his own pistol, which was holstered on a belt under his long coat. Instead he grabbed the stranger's rifle.

They both tried to seize control of the rifle. Both of the men had both hands on it. Elijah was driven backwards into one of the cars with a slam. Items in his back pack dug into his back. Both men refused to let go of the rifle. Elijah gathered himself. He was pinned up against the car.

"Let go. . . of. . . it!" the stranger commanded.

Elijah had no leverage to push back. But when he looked into the eyes of his adversary, he saw no real fight in him. Elijah relied upon his hand-to-hand combat training as a Iraq War veteran and a Detroit Police officer to out maneuver his much younger assailant. He pulled the rifle down with one hand and up with the other, spinning the rifle so the stranger crossed his arms and had to let go.

This move caused Elijah to turn his body, and his hip was exposed to his foe, and his coat opened. As the man let go of the rifle, he easily reached down and pulled the pistol out of Elijah's holster. The stranger then pointed the pistol back at Elijah.

Elijah quickly pointed the rifle back at the long haired panting man. Elijah realized that his trusty method of taking the gun should have been done in the opposite direction so his pistol would have been out of his opponent's reach. Elijah said, "We aren't making much progress here."

"Au Contraire. That rifle is empty."

Elijah pointed the rifle to the ground. *Click.* "So, you couldn't have shot me anyway, but now you have the gun and you still didn't shoot me." Elijah put the empty .22 rifle down and started walking down the road away from the man. "Okay, we're good."

"What?! Hey!. . .No! You better stop! I'm the one with the gun! Hey! I said get back here!" He tried to keep up with Elijah.

"I want that back, by the way," Elijah said.

"No! It's mine now!"

Elijah said, "You should go get your rifle."

The man scrambled back to get the rifle, while trying to point the pistol at Elijah.

Elijah asked, "Are you weird or something? That scarf is nasty looking." The white scarf had dried blood all over it.

"No, it's not a scarf. It's a bandage."

Elijah stopped and took a good look at it. "Sorry. It's not very well wrapped for a bandage. Let me fix it."

"No! Keep back!"

"Have it your way." Elijah was not sure how much effort to invest in this stranger. "Where you headed?"

"I gotta go to Kentucky."

A short while later, Elijah asked, "So what's your name?"

"Does it really matter?"

"That's a weird name."

"Jason."

"I'm Elijah Williams."

They walked several more minutes in silence. The interstate took them through the industrial part of Sidney, now all abandoned.

Elijah said, "Maybe once we get out of this section, we could go get some road salad."

"That's all I ever eat. I'm surprised I'm not green now, on top of everything else."

"You mean your neck?"

"Yea."

"What is it?"

"I have no idea."

"I bet my wife would know. She's a doctor."

"Really? Where is she?"

"Well you'd have to go back the other way about twenty miles."

"Maybe I should. This thing on my neck might kill me. But I'm trying to get to Kentucky."

"Family?"

"Yea."

"Well, Jason, you can go north and see the doctor and then convalesce, then walk back, maybe healthy. Or, you can keep going south and would be at least forty miles further south and still have who knows how far to go."

"You got me thinkin'." Jason kept walking southward. "Your wife got the medicine to heal me up if she does know what it is?"

"Not likely."

"Well then."

So they kept walking. They reached the southern side of Sidney's former industrial area.

"Over there looks like a good place to forage," Jason said.

"Okay."

The men were able to find some greens worthy of consumption. This time of year any vegetation found that was leftover from summer was bitter, but tolerating some of the bitterness was something that could be gotten used to.

Jason said, "I'm tired." An abandoned luxury car along the road provided an inviting place to bed down for a nap. He got into the back seat.

"Mind if I join you?" Elijah asked.

"It's a free. . .State," Jason said.

Elijah figured out how to recline the passenger seat in front and sat down.

Chapter 3

Crawfordton

At the school, Amy was busy working with the twenty-two students in the class. Even though the schooling was provided for free, most people did not send their children because they wanted them to work on the farms. There were a couple of other such functioning schools outside of town.

Phil was not being the kind of help at school that Amy expected. Phil told Amy that he was busy working with Angela on her Chinese literature, which Amy found impressive, but said Angela should do some Bible reading. Angela was keen on studying the easy to understand, *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, and enjoyed the discussions with Phil that accompanied it.

After school, Phil went with Jayden up to the fortress on Dan's Hill. He took Angela along.

The Chief Construction Engineer stopped by. "What do you think, Phil?"

"What's not to like?" Phil said.

"Yep," the engineer said, "This will be quite a tribute to Colonel Wilcox."

"Wilcox?" Phil asked. He had been at odds with Wilcox in the past. "You know, I find it quite strange that Wilcox. . ."

Jayden interrupted, "We are all sorry about Wilcox being killed in action up north. It was no surprise to us that he acted with gallantry."

"Umm. . .no surprise at all. Our hats are off to him," Phil said, unaware of his demise. Phil wanted to change the subject. "So. . . the garrison is coming here pretty soon?"

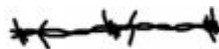
"Officially, I don't know, but I suspect any day now."

Jayden said, "Let's go inside and take a look."

Angela was trying to pull Phil aside. He leaned toward her.

"What's a garrison?"

"I'll tell ya later." Phil wanted to have adequate time for their usual in-depth discussion on military topics.



Ethan Mentzer and his Scouts came riding into Crawfordton. The five horses drew the attention of the townspeople. Ethan, the Viking-Cowboy was a tall blonde with an angular build and face. He was dressed like a mountain man, but wore a Hollywood version of a cowboy hat.

Unlike his previous visits, he now had the female warrior, Jackie with him on the beautiful chestnut colored ride.

Jackie had softened her appearance from the tri-Mohawk hairdo she sported at the Battle of Crawfordton. Her hair was growing out. Like the other Scouts, she was wrapped up in heavy clothes for the weather.

Ella saw Ethan and his rider out of what was left of one of the front windows. Most of the windows were shot out during the Battle. "Amy! Come here! Look who's back!"

Amy joined her at the window. "Ooooh."

Ella said, "That chick sure knows how to get the hot guys."

Amy said, "It's not that tough. Back in the day, Phil was a pretty big catch."

Ella looked at Amy and wondered how accurate her version of history was.

The other riders had the look of people who were not to be trifled with. The entire Troop was well armed and well supplied, Mentzer's Scouts were one of the keys to victory in the Battle of Crawfordton.

Jayden contorted himself around the women to get a look out the window. He finally got a peek at who the women were looking at and rolled his eyes. "I hate it when he comes here. He always wants something." He looked at the women and shook his head.

A couple of Guard sentries met the Scouts. All the members of the Crawfordton Guard were too young, or too old to do their mandatory service with the Ohio Coalition. The Guard was a force that had shrunk down to about 50 members after the Battle of Crawfordton.

Jayden went out the front door to greet the scouts. "Ethan."

"Colonel," Ethan said, with a salute.

"Give me a full report."

"Sir, the Shanesville Raiders are requesting assistance in dealing with a band of marauders. The marauders have no known heavy weapons in particular. In fact, some of them are armed with medieval weapons."

"Really?" Jayden said. "You mean like, archers and spearmen?"

"Affirmative. Some of these groups are running out of ammunition."

Jayden thought that if they waited a couple of weeks, maybe the Fort Wilcox Garrison could help Mentzer. This problem sounded more like a nuisance than a perilous operation. Jayden turned to one of the teenaged sentries. "Private, go over to

Captain Miller's house with my instructions for him to gather two platoons to go to Shanesville."

"Sir!"

Jayden turned to the other private. "Toll the rally bell."

"Yessir."

Chapter 4

Interstate 75 - Near Piqua, Ohio

The two men had been travelling together on foot for about three days. The wind was cold, but Jason was still sweating. His skin had a sickly paleness to it.

"I'm tired," Jason said. "I gotta stop."

"There's a pickup truck up there ahead. You can rest up there."

They got about half way to the truck and Jason collapsed on the road, face first.

"Damn!" Elijah ran to help him. He took his pistol back from Jason and slung Jason's rifle over his shoulder. Elijah walked with Jason until they got next to the pickup truck.

"Oh hell no!" Elijah looked into the truck and saw that the previous owner had committed suicide with a bullet to the head. He thought about scavenging the truck for a pistol and some ammo, but the chances of success were small and he wanted no part of opening the door. That would be too much multi-tasking. "C'mon. That truck is too small. We can make it down the hill to that car over there on the northbound lane."

They crossed the median. It was becoming increasingly difficult for Elijah to help Jason. Jason was unable to help himself much anymore. They found a full-sized luxury car that was comfy warm inside with the solar thermal heat. Jason's eyes were shut. He was out of energy.

Elijah wanted to get a look at Jason's neck. He held up Jason's head so he could unravel the bandage. "Dang!" With all of the swelling, Jason really didn't have a neck. The bulbous swollen neck had a massive lesion that was seeping.

The infection was obviously too great for Jason's system to fight off without modern medicine. It was only going to be a matter of a short while before the malady claimed him. Jason wondered what he could do for his new found friend. Reason won out over compassion. Elijah made the conscious decision to abandon Jason.

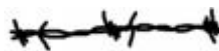
If only Jason would have permitted him to look at that boil earlier, maybe he could have worked on it and improved his chances. Maybe. . .It was too late for maybe.

A small voice in his head said to leave the poor guy some water or something. Another cynical voice said there was nothing to put any of his valuable water in. "Dangitall." The only liquid container Elijah had was the one he was carrying. Elijah left Jason in the car and didn't look back. He had to avoid self torment by pondering something other than the poor soul he left behind.

Only a fraction of the journey was completed. There was comfort in the fact that the load he was carrying was heavy. Angel loaded him down with a heavy amount of drinking water from the well. Angel said that water was the most valuable commodity on a trip like the one Elijah was taking. Angel said the pack would get lighter soon enough.

Elijah couldn't help it. He thought about the people in Kentucky who would never see Jason again. But who knows? Maybe they were dead too.

Elijah continued the journey. He tried his best to put Jason's suffering out of his mind. Over the last couple years there was no practical way to have any empathy for all those who were truly suffering. He looked into the sky. It was blue. The sky was always blue behind the clouds. Millennia ago the sky was blue. It will still be blue tomorrow if he lived to continue his journey or not.



Captain Henry Miller chose Lt. Kowalski's Platoon-A and Lt. Murphy's Platoon-D for the expeditionary force to Shanesville. Platoon-B, the strongest, and most autonomous, was being held in Crawfordton.

There was no longer any Platoon-C. It was wiped out, to the last man, at the Battle of Crawfordton, only a few months earlier.

During the Battle there were also many civilian casualties, and irregular fighters. After the Battle so many homes were destroyed that they left for less brown grass anywhere else. Moving to nearby Delburg was always an option for anyone who was desperate. In Delburg, there was free housing, but that meant living under Gofinn rule. The local Gofinn government was tyrannical and unpredictable.

Platoons A and D and the Company Squad soon began the ten mile hike to Shanesville. The Shanesville Raiders were the Crawfordton Guard's best ally. The Guardsmen were ready and willing to return the help for past favors done for them by the Raiders.

Captain Miller did not pass along information about the strange fighting capabilities of their adversary to his men. The Guard was used to asymmetrical warfare, except

they were the ones who were used to using the inferior force tactics. Miller did not want his men to underestimate their foes.

On the positive side, it was refreshing for the men to be able to leave the confines of the Crawfordton defense perimeter. They had spent weeks and even months at a time without seeing the outside world.

The expeditionary force took a break halfway through the hike.

Pvt. Ella Phipps, the Colonel's wife, who a short while ago was looking out the window with Amy Crawford at Ethan's scouts. She sat down on the damp ground with her pack. Next to her, was her best friend in platoon-A, teenager Martin Preston.

She told Preston, "Ain't you tired of doing this stuff? Don't get me wrong, it is great for us that you are dedicated to our town, helping thin out the baddies and all, but you are going to be a seasoned veteran before you even go into your mandatory OC service." All 20 year-olds had to go into five years of mandatory service with the Ohio Coalition Force.

Martin was staring into space. "I don't know. I don't really know any difference. I could be working on a boring farm or something, but you know how it goes. We will all end up fighting for our lives anyhow. At least this way I can make a little money for fighting."

Ella said, "Yea, I suppose so." Ella thought about what a geeky looking thing Martin was. When he volunteered for the Guard, he could barely carry the Mosin-Nagant rifle they gave him. Martin had been in several skirmishes and had seen comrades fall.

Now after a couple of years Martin carried his captured AK-47 with confidence. Otherwise, he was still a quiet young man, who at least on the outside seemed emotionally stable.

"Come on you lazy maggots, let's get going," Sergeant Yamakawa said to Ella and Martin.

"Shut up Ken!" Ella said. Ella Phipps was almost old enough to be his mother. The age difference made it all that much easier for her Sergeant to give her the business. Ella could have been promoted numerous times before, but she had no interest in getting into a bunch of politics, being the Colonel's wife. Ella was content to be the number one sniper in the Guard. They liked to tease her that she had a "built-in bipod" on her chest for when she was prone on the ground.

The Sergeant started laughing. "Get going Phipps."

"This pack is heavy, ass."

Yamakawa couldn't help it. "Yea, but you've got plenty of counterweight in front to balance it out."

Private Martin worried that the highly personal sex based goofing could turn serious. It sure wasn't the way he would run a squad if he were a Sergeant.

Ella yelled, "I'm gonna beat your skinny ass!" She hopped up and started to chase him. Quickness was not her best attribute.

The Sergeant hopped away and was laughing, "That's more like it Private!"

Martin and some others started laughing at the scene. He looked for Lt. Kowalski who was preoccupied with other soldiers.

The force began readying themselves to continue the trek. The typical grumbling started.

Lt. Murphy saw Captain Henry Miller inspecting a ring he held in his hand. "Oh! Is the Captain finally getting ready to make his move?"

The Captain stood there for a couple of moments pondering his answer to the question. "Yea. It's time. As soon as we get back. Tonight, I hope." Henry thought he better not wait any longer. He couldn't bear the thought of Tammy being with anyone else.

"Well that's great," Murphy said. "Life needs to go on, you know."

"Yes it does. That's what we fight for."

Chapter 5

Crawfordton

Phil was listening to the hand crank-power shortwave radio. He spent hours every day scanning the world band for news from anywhere he could get it, and trying to parse the propaganda, considering the source, to determine what was really going on.

The Continental Army controlled a far-flung piece of ground from the east all the way somewhere into the plains.

From the best he could tell, it sounded like the Continental Army had been successful in holding the Homeland Security - United Nations Axis in check. The Axis controlled the entire northeast.

The southeast of the US was now a mess of apocalyptic proportion. There were no organized entities in the southeast. No one to stop the killing. So the killing went on for all reasons, any reason, and no reason, all the time. Undoubtedly, some power from outside the region would wait until southlanders beat themselves down, then easily move in and take over.

With Chinese backing, the Mexican Army had encroached into the southwest, seizing most of New Mexico, Arizona, and southern California.

The Republic of Texas and the Mormon Republic were the natural allies of the Continental Army.

Many in Washington and Oregon and throughout the northwest were trying to form the nation of "Cascadia". Many in that region were also in favor of uniting with Canada, as Alaska already had done. A large contingent of pro-Axis people resided there as well. Almost no one liked the status-quo.

Hawaii was an independent country, the last that Phil knew. Whether or not it was still that way, was unknown.

Angela came in to bug Phil. She was carrying her new favorite book, *The Art of War*. As long as Angela was studying and learning, or otherwise keeping busy, she was less likely to see haunting memories of the past in her mind's eye.

"Phil," Angela said. "Soonzoo says 'all warfare is deception'. Deception is tricking, right?"

"Sure is."

"So is war strategy a bunch of lies?"

Phil thought for awhile, "I never thought about it like that. But you know, God's People used deceptive war strategy in the Bible. So I guess it's all good. You want to win; I mean; in a war, right? "

"We always win."

"We do okay. God lets us win. We have to pray."

"We pray at deception?"

"We pray they will fail, and we won't."

Angela was perplexed by the paradox. "What if the Axis bastards pray?"

"You know you got me in trouble with that one. Personally, I don't care, but you got Amy thinking I'm teaching you to talk like a sailor, not a little girl."

"I don't know nothing about sailing. You aren't teaching me to be like a little girl."

"I'll give you that. Can you hide it a little better?"

"You mean deceive?"

"There's a difference between lying and telling all kinds of truth that people don't like to hear. You used to be pretty good at it. Now you have a knack for saying the worst. . . stuff."

"Is it still okay if I ask you anything I want?"

"You know you can, but don't get me into trouble."

"Did you ever see that Ella has big boobs?"

"What?! Uh. . .yea, how can you not?"

"Boys look at them, don't they?"

"Yea. . .so?"

"Why do you boys like them?"

Phil wanted to send her to Amy but Amy would only shut down the conversation anyway. "God made. . .boys so they want to do that."

"So God wants boys to stare at boobs?"

Is all that talk in that book you got there?" Phil wanted desperately to change the subject.

"No. I thought you read it already."

"You better *NOT* bring up anyone's boobs at the dinner table. I swear. . ."

"Do you think I will be pretty?"

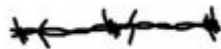
Phil was surprised once again by the turn in the conversation. "Child. You are beautiful now. Don't waste any time thinking about something like that. Even if you turn out to be as homely as a toad, some crazy boy, or a bunch of them, will want you for a wife anyhow. I can guarantee that much."

"Toads aren't that homely. Boys always talk mean to me."

Phil sighed, resigning that he could never win with her. He knew that Angela's past carried a stigma among the townspeople. Little boys were no doubt saying vile things to Angela's face that they had heard coming out of their own parent's mouths. "Little one, you gotta put up with their crap as much as you can, then a little more, but don't get over reactive when the time comes to put a stop to it."

"I won't. I will do what Soonzoo would."

That comment sent Phil's eyelids fluttering. He was trying to mentally cross-reference what was in *Art of War* with Angela's unpredictable little mind.



Elijah was at the Troy, Ohio exit on I-75. He was getting tired. Real tired, and never ate very well. Would he wear himself down and end up being afflicted with something like Jason did? Getting a boil from hell on his neck like his friend Jason? Then he wondered how much it really mattered.

He saw a guy on a bicycle coming his way on the northbound lane at a good clip. Travelers on the highway kept to their traditional right-hand lane to help keep their distance from other travelers.

As the bike rider got closer, Elijah could see that the guy was wearing a red ball cap. He had a large pouch. He was a mailman.

Elijah never heard back from the letter he sent to Rene and Matt. That must have been months ago. It was close to a certainty that they were not in Cincinnati any more. Was this trip even worth it?

That red hat meant you better not screw around with that guy, or a relentless Postal Inspector would make sure you regretted it. The Postal Union Inspectors were starting to get the distinct reputation of being extremely tough. Maybe with brave and dedicated

people like them, civilization had a chance. Or maybe it was all futility, doomed to perpetual zombie bandenkrieg.

It seemed like most people had never learned to get out of their normalcy bias, even after all that had happened. People went on thinking the collapse of the US would never happen no matter what, because it had never happened like that. Now it seemed like people would never accept the idea that the Ohio Coalition might someday collapse because society was starting to stabilize over the past couple of years. There were no guarantees about anything.

The road going through Troy seemed dead. Most of the City was to the east of the road. It was always a wonder to pass through cities. What could be going on over there right now? So much unspeakable horror had happened. God only knew what depravity had taken place. What was national news before was commonplace now.

Elijah was startled by a dog barking behind him. He turned, and there was a pack of five feral dogs. Dogs were returning to their natural wolf-like behaviors. Eventually they would probably micro-evolve back into a type of wolf. Dogs also had a difficult time finding something to eat. A couple more of the dogs were growling, creeping closer.

Elijah thought, the white and black one is too small. That big one, the alpha hound looks like he would be tough. Here we go, you there. . . look just right. . .BLAM! . . .for dinner.

One shot was all it took to drop the mutt. The alpha hound lunged at Elijah while the others ran away. Elijah beat the dog in the mouth with his pistol before it could do anything to him. Then it also ran away. Elijah could have easily eliminated all of them, but those canines would make a nice meal for someone else.

Elijah looked around. Didn't see anyone. He pulled the dog off to the side and pulled out his pocket knife. Looks like eating was going to be pretty good tonight.

Chapter 6

East of Shanesville, Ohio

One of the Shanesville Raiders greeted the Guards on the road to Shanesville.

The Raider saluted Captain Miller, who was recognizable to all of the Raiders .
"Sir, we think we know where the Hexmen are."

"Hexmen?"

"Yea. I mean, yes sir. That is the name of their clan."

"Okay. You wouldn't happen to know why, would you?"

"They put tattoos of hexes on their faces. You know, like a honeycomb. It is another few miles from here. South. They are in a fairly large woodlot."

Captain Miller had experience with this type of scenario around a rural woodlot. He had experience as part of the anvil component of the hammer and anvil tactics used on a murderous cannibalistic clan. The tactic worked flawlessly on the clan.

The walk took them down a less travelled county road. People were coming out of their homes. The houses were few along the road. The few people who were seen were waving and cheering at the troops, and bringing them water and food. Those seeking deliverance from the Hexmen knew why the troops were there and were happy to see an effort being made to rid themselves of the dreaded scourge.

Captain Miller was greeted by his friend from Shanesville, Major Tom Zimmer. The Raiders and the Guard both observed each other's rank. That protocol started months earlier in Delburg by Major Zimmer and Colonel Phipps. So Captain Miller saluted the Major.

"Thanks for coming, Miller," the Major said.

"Our privilege, sir."

"Here's the situation; We think the entire Hexman Nation, or Tribe, Mob, whatever, is in that woodlot over to the northwest. We have not tried to evacuate the woodlot. Every time we try to move in, they use indirect fire with their archers while using firearms."

"What's so tough about that?"

"You ever try to advance out in the open against armed men who are under cover while arrows are falling down on you from the sky?"

"No sir."

"Well, the arrows are more of a terrorist weapon, but they did hit a couple of my guys and killed one of them. Meanwhile three more were gunshot casualties. I don't know if they are dead or not. We can't get over there to help them, but they will be for sure. Bastards are just leaving them there as bait."

"Oh. Yes, I can see your casualties on the ground out there." Henry Miller wanted to suggest sending their Raider Medic out there. The one who he heard had eyes for Tammy. But that wouldn't be very nice. "Any ideas, sir?"

"None that I particularly like. We must get these guys out of here. They are brazen and tenacious. They are making life hell for everyone around here."

"What about burning down the woods?"

"It's too wet, Miller."

"Our practice, that of the Guard, is that unless we have some kind of unfair advantage, we don't assault. It's way too costly."

"So, what do we do? Nothing?"

"Yes sir, siege warfare, sir."

"Well, I need to rescue those Raiders out there. Evans!"

"Yes sir." Lt. Evans said.

"Take your men to the south side of this woodlot. I am leaving you with the fewest men. If they come out in force get out to the east immediately. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"No heroics, just get out of their way."

Zimmer said, "We've got all sides covered now. At least if they do get away, we will know where they are. Miller, your people have been on a long hike. You can keep them here in reserve for now."

"Yes sir." Henry just wanted more and more to get this over with so he could go back home and see Tammy.



That night was not a good night for Angela-Ayanna. She tossed and turned in her bed, which consisted of a couple of folded over blankets on the floor. There was too much idle time. Too much time to think about. . .being out in the woods. It was dark. The pungent smell of rotting protein. . .bodies. That smell was something that a person could never get used to, nor should they ever have to.

The sole function of the clan was to exist. They did so by living off of the flesh and blood of those who they kidnapped and murdered. They carved up their victims into portion-sized bits, then consumed them. The inhibition to partake in the appalling behavior grew less and less over time. In time, those who reacted negatively to cannibalism were seen as the weird ones.

Bodies sliced up, bones piled up. But the worst thing, the most unforgettable thing was the head.

A guy's head was cracked open and people from the clan were getting in each other's way to scoop out the gray matter with their hands and shoving it into their mouths, a la tartar. Meanwhile, the eyes of the head. They were wide open. They were staring right at. . .her!

Angela screamed a blood curdling scream that was bad enough to wake the dead. The scream was not once or twice, but repeated one after another.

The dream was more real than the dark room she was in now. It really happened.

Amy and Phil came from their bedroom to her. Phil held her tightly to his chest, which still carried some pain from his nearly fatal gunshot wound.

"Hush Baby," Phil said. "It's okay. It was just a bad dream. It's not true. We won't let anything happen to you."

Sadly, Ayanna knew it was not a dream. She was awake the whole time. And it was all too true. Her parents were evil. She thought herself to be evil of the highest order.

Chapter 7

South of Shanesville

"Sir!" A lookout alerted Captain Miller. "There are some Hexmen waving a white flag!"

Captain Miller looked at the three-man party through his field glasses. He saw one of them holding a small white flag of truce. They were not carrying any bows or rifles. They had their hands on top of their heads. Captain Miller found Major Zimmer. "Sir, what do you think it means?"

"It means they don't think they can win. Let's go greet them Miller. They got three, so I'll take Lt. Harper along."

Miller was confused. "What is there to talk about?"

"What, Miller? You want to just wipe them all out?"

"Affirmative. It would make the world a better place. No one would ever have to worry about Hexmen again."

"They got families. No, I'm not authorizing that."

"Yes sir. Ready to meet and greet."

The three men approached the Hexmen who were out in the middle of a treeless field. The Hexmen had a terrified look on their faces. One of them said, "We unconditionally surrender."

The three long-haired unshaven men each had a single one inch hex tattooed on their left cheek. They wore multiple layers of clothing.

"Get down on the ground!" Henry Miller ordered them. "Keep your hands where we can see them!" He had been through this hundreds of times as a Detroit City Policeman.

The three Hexmen slowly squatted down with their hands on their heads. They slipped their hands down the back of their necks and pulled out hand guns that were stashed in their back collars.

"Gun!" Captain Miller Shouted as he noticed the Hexman opposite the Major was brandishing the weapon. Zimmer and Harper were caught too flatfooted for the

situation. They were casually holding their guns, not ready for such an attack. Miller, who was ready, fired at the assailant, but it was too late.

The Hexman opposite of Major Tom Zimmer fired three shots at the Major, hitting him twice. The Captain's shots then hit the Hexman, who dropped.

The Hexman opposite Lt. Harper had trouble getting his gun out, and Harper unloaded three shots into him.

Before Captain Miller could get fully turned, the Hexman opposite of him shot at him. Captain Miller was hit square in the face, killing him instantly.

Miller's treacherous killer was Lt. Harper's secondary target and Harper did not miss. All three of the Hexmen's "surrender" party were eliminated.

Harper stood there in a daze, staring at his fallen superiors in rank. Both of the officers were now clearly dead. He heard a whistle from the woods. Hexmen were pouring out of the woods toward him.

Lieutenant Murphy, back at the line saw the treachery. "Chaaaaaaarge! Move! Move! Move! On me!" Guard Platoon-D were moving out to the oncoming attack.

Kowalski didn't like it. It was not their way to be fighting on Hexman terms. But Kowalski couldn't just leave Murphy go it alone. Kowalski ordered privates in the Company Squad, "Get a message to the other groups! Send them into the woods!" Then he ordered his Platoon-A to follow Platoon-D. "Let's go!"

Once the Guardsmen got within shooting range of the Hexmen, a couple of whistles were heard. They turned and retreated back into the woods.

The momentum of the action carried the Guardsmen toward what was sure to be a vicious confrontation. Kowalski couldn't bear it. "Hit the deck! Take Cover!" Platoon-A was out in the open, but they made themselves as small of a target as possible.

Murphy noticed Kowalski's action and reconsidered. "Pull back! Pull back!"

As the platoons turned, a salvo of about thirty arrows came out of the woods, along with some gunfire. One of the Guardsmen was hit in the back with an arrow. He stumbled and went to the ground. He slowly got up and was then hit by gunfire. Two more Guardsmen were hit by gunfire and laid injured out in the field.

The rest of Platoon-D joined Platoon-A at their position. From their vantage point, Kowalski could see that one of the Raider platoons had entered the woods unopposed, from the east.

There was gunfire happening within the woods from the Raiders, and what sounded like return fire. This only went on for a short while, then it stopped.

Murphy said, "Okay men, let's advance, slowly."

Kowalski gave the same orders to his men. The platoons got closer to the woods and finally entered the woods with no opposition. The Hexmen had evacuated.

Then sporadic gunfire was coming from the south. The Hexmen had chosen the path of least resistance. As ordered, the small southern contingency "got out of their way."

Murphy and Kowalski linked up with the Raiders. The Hexmen had escaped to the south without taking many casualties. The Raiders captured one of the *Hexkids*.

There was no more morale left in among the Guardsmen. The loss of Captain Miller was too much for them to go on. No one else was killed in action, but some of the casualties were serious.

Ella asked Martin, "Why didn't we just shoot those worthless pukes?! Oh my God! This is so not right! Why did we come here anyway?!"

Martin said, "He was just a good man. He was doing the right thing."

"Right for who!?" Ella snapped.

Martin just shrugged his shoulders.

"Preston!" Sergeant Yamakawa barked.

"I'm on it." Troops had to take turns hauling Henry Miller's remains back to Crawfordton. He knew it was his turn.

Chapter 8

Elijah built a fire at night to hide the smoke, and take some of the chill out of the air. He couldn't wait until daytime so he could camp out in a warm car. He could only hope that tomorrow would be a sunny day.

Cooking dog on the open fire at night was not the most convenient arrangement, nor the safest. He was able to fashion a rotisserie out of some sticks that worked fine. "George Foreman has a grill. Now Elijah Williams has one." He chuckled at his own humor.

The dog wasn't the tastiest thing to eat, but it was filling. Elijah put some salt on some of the leftovers to extend the shelf life a bit. There were a lot of leftovers. It made no sense to leave anything that was edible behind. Yet, carrying any extra weight would take more energy.

At daybreak he was back on the road. The throbs of fatigue were setting in, but it would soon be nap time.

"Crap!" It was starting to rain. It was going to be cold. "Oh hell no!" It was going to be icy. It became terrible to walk on the road. He started taking small steps to keep his balance. Then he decided it was better to walk along side of the road, in the grass instead.

Progress was slow but steady. He thought that if he walked for a few hours in the morning, maybe things would warm up later.

There were some people up ahead, resting under an overpass. They didn't try to hide the fact that they were staring at him. It was two women a guy. Next to them were some smallish packs and they each had a canteen. Compared to Elijah, who's resources were limited, theirs were inadequate at best.

As he got closer, Elijah could see them bundled up and huddled together shivering. Their faces were somewhat skeletal.

"Hi." Elijah said.

They did not return the salutation. The young woman stood behind the man while trying to see Elijah.

"Hey, I've got some food here," Elijah said, moving closer, pulling the dog's leg out of his pack.

"Stay back!" The man said, pulling out a pistol.

The young woman saw the food and ran toward it.

"Get back here, Terri!" the man ordered.

Terri chomped down on the cold dog leg, tearing it up in ravenous fashion.

"Thank you," the older woman said. She started crying. "Thank you so much, sir."

"I've got more here, enough for everyone."

The women moved toward Elijah's helping hand. They thanked Elijah for the meat and the man put down the pistol.

The man looked at the meat. "That is not chicken! Hey! This guy is a cannibal!"

The women looked up at Elijah. Then back at the man.

Elijah held up another dog leg. "Okay folks. Here is what you are eating. You ever seen a human with a joint like that? This is a dog, okay?"

The women went back to eating. The older one said, "Shut up Dale. Eat the dog."

Elijah handed Dale the other dog leg.

"Thanks. . .sorry. Where you from mister?"

"Detroit, then Crawfordton."

"Never heard of it."

"It's kind'a new."

"Sounds to me like you are making it all up."

"Dale! Don't be stupid! Shut up!"

They were too busy eating to talk very much.

The older woman said, "Thank you, mister. . ."

"Elijah."

"I'm Pam. This is my daughter Terri."

"Whoa!" Elijah said, "That's your daughter? You are very young looking."

Dale rolled his eyes.

"Thank you mister," Pam said. She broke a bit of a smile as she glanced at Elijah. "I swear, you saved our lives today. I was on my last nerve."

"You're welcome. It was my privilege to help. What are you folks doin' out here on this fine morning?"

"That's kind of. . . personal," Dale said.

Pam said, "Oh, were just on our way to take that one," she pointed at Dale, " to the mental ward."

"That ain't funny," Dale said.

"Seriously," Pam said, "We're going to Cincinnati to find our son. He was off to the University of Cincinnati on a scholarship."

Elijah realized how hopeless that story sounded. Maybe his own story sounded just as bad. "You must really love your son."

"Yes," Pam said. "What about you?"

"Same thing. I'm trying to find my daughter and son in law."

Dale said, "Well, good luck to ya mister."

"Don't be rude, Dale," Pam said. She looked at Elijah and said, "We want you to travel with us. Don't we Dale?"

"Well. . ." Dale looked at Pam, who was communicating with her eyes. "Yes we do. You should travel with us Elijah."

"That sounds good. Hey, I got some plastic sheeting. Never let a good rain go to waste. Let's collect some rainwater. Then we can warm up."

Chapter 9

Crawfordton

The body had already been laid to rest. But Logan "Angel" Howard wanted to conduct a special memorial service for Captain Henry Miller.

The service took place in the usual place, Mrs. Welch's garage. But it was called "church", not "garage", because that was who met there. The church was an organization of people, not the name of a building. But naturally, many started calling the garage a "church" and others scoffed at the idea of a garage being a church.

About 200 souls were present for the church service. This was a number higher than anyone in Crawfordton had ever seen; even though the population had decreased from its high; and even though the weather was cold with some snow and rain mix.

Tammy White was in the front row. She was especially distraught, unable to find any meaning in the event.

Next to her was her friend and co-worker, "Doctor" Aliyah Williams. Aliyah knew Henry for a long time. She wondered if her husband, Elijah was dead, alone somewhere, or if something would happen to him.

Colonel Jayden Phipps and his wife, Ella were both near the front. Colonel Phipps had always felt inadequate in his role as a military leader. And now Henry, who was a great asset, would no longer be around to be counted on.

Everyone from the Crawford House was there, including Angela, who was on her best behavior. She wondered if there were tactics that were not followed or a prayer that was not offered, resulting in Henry's death. Ayanna believed that somehow, Henry's death could have been averted.

The service opened in prayer. Thanks was given that God had sent Captain Henry Miller to their Community, and that Henry was a blessing. The preacher gave further instances that Henry was a good man and gave of himself for others.

Angel said to the congregation, "But no one gets to God's Heaven by works! In other words, you cannot earn your way into Heaven. This is because no one is perfect. People like to say that 'church people' are a bunch of hypocrites. Well, some are. But that should not keep anyone from becoming a Christian. In these times it is more important than ever. I want every person here right now to listen closely."

"I want to read to you from the Bible, from the Book of John, Chapter 3. 'Nicodemus said unto Him, How can a man be borne when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be borne?'

'Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.'"

Angel finished the scripture reading. He paused for a moment, gathering himself.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, You must be born again! I am happy to report to you that I know Henry Miller believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for his own Salvation. Last year Henry made his confession through prayer, led by our beloved Brother Tim Crawford, who is now with Brother Henry Miller right now in Heaven!"

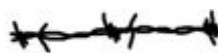
Several "A-Men's" were heard through the congregation.

Angel continued, "Our loss is Heaven's gain! But what about you?! Will you accept God's free gift of Salvation? He sent His Son Jesus to die for you on the Cross. What will you do? Every person who was ever created was meant to accept Jesus. Seem too good to be true? Satan wants you to think that. Put that stinking thought out of your head right now. You don't know more than God. I am asking all of you who would like to have someone pray with you to come forward."

Several people made their way to the front of the crowd wanting to settle their spiritual accounts with God.

A prayer was offered again for thanks for Henry, that souls came to salvation, and that God protected many others.

Tammy was clearly heartbroken with Henry's passing, yet from her spiritual side, she felt deep down inexplicable joy that she was one of those who was instrumental in helping to bring Henry to the Lord. When she thought of Henry from any of those perspectives, it led to more tears. There is never a guarantee on anyone's future, no matter what the plans are.



A few days later, the widow Sophia Thomas and her two young boys came calling to the Crawford House looking for Phil. In the past she had looked upon Phil with plenty of suspicion, and did not like the direction he was allowing her boys' education to go.

Phil stepped outside the House to greet her. Phil knew that Sophia's husband, Noah, was killed in Delburg. Sophia came back to their Crawfordton home just before it was going up on the public auction block. Their House, directly across the road from the Crawford's place, was also severely damaged during the Battle of Crawfordton, but anything was better than living in the tyrannical people's republic of Delburg where her husband was murdered and she was badly beaten and raped. If she were to return there, she and her boys would be in grave danger.

"Sophia."

"Hi Phil. Phil. . .I just want to say, I know you don't want us to ever ask you for anything, and you say we are liberals, but. . ." She couldn't continue.

"Yes?" Phil was steadfastly not interested in handouts to anyone.

"My boys, Phil. . .I lost my husband to . . .I don't know. . .," She started crying.

Phil had to hold her as she was practically doubling over. Phil was afraid of what she may want.

"Phil, will you train my boys?"

"Train them?"

"Yes. Shooting, army stuff, growing food. Everything. I don't want my boys to go down without a fight."

"Yes. Yes I will. If they want to learn, and if they do what I say, send them over every day."

The next day Phil told of the agreed upon plan to Amy.

"Phil, I thought Sophia didn't want anything to do with that sort of thing."

"You crazy women like to change your dang minds."

"It sounds like to me that you are starting to run some kind of ROTC in our little school. Is that really what you want?"

Phil looked stunned. Then he realized that the notion was a perfect idea. "Yes. I am going to run a military academy. Except it won't be in our school. Oh, they can get their regular classes there, but then they will get their military schooling over at Fort Wilcox."

Amy didn't know what to say. She knew that after his injury from the assassination attempt God had some bigger purpose for the old rascal. Her old rascal.

Within a couple of days the newly organized garrison for Fort Wilcox arrived. This would change everything. One way or the other. Phil was a little concerned about Ayanna's conceivable "big army" scenario.

The new commander of the Garrison was Captain Mark Anderson. Anderson walked with a serious limp and dressed sloppy, even for an apocalyptic disaster.

Phil was not impressed; so far. Why would the Confederation send that guy to their best Fort to garrison. But Phil had an open mind. "Captain," Phil said, "I am looking to start a military academy here. I want to allocate an area in the Fort for that purpose."

Captain Anderson had a hacking cough. "You mean, bring kids here?"

"Yea, future soldiers."

"No way. No kids."

"Fine, let's not work together and see who looks like they can't get along."

"Let me tell you something gramps! Are you threatening me?"

"How stupid are you?! You'd look like quite the wimp when they found out an old man laid you out!"

Just then Angela came to join Phil, like usual. She saw the red-faced roosters. She asked the Captain, "Are you ready for the big attack yet?"

"What?!" Anderson asked.

"You got a big fort here. If the Axis bastards want to attack, do you think they are going to ignore this place?"

"Whaaaaat?" Anderson asked. He felt like he was listening to one of the Confederation Generals in a little girl's body.

"You're screwed. We might as well start digging your damn graves right now." Angela said, walking away shaking her head.

"Cadet!" Phil said to Angela. "Show some respect for your Captain!"

Angela stood at attention and saluted Anderson as she had seen so many do at their house. "Sorry Captain, for telling you things you don't want to hear." Angela held her salute.

Phil sighed. "Including that!"

"Sorry sir." Angela was happy that she was being treated like a real soldier. Albeit that she was catching hell like one.

"Dismissed," Phil said.

Angela dropped her salute and turned away.

"Her eyes," Anderson said, swallowing hard. "They are like they are looking right into you. You. . . You tell her to say all that?"

"Friend, I have no control over her at all. Where do you want us to put our stuff?" Phil asked.

"She talks like she's possessed by some General."

Phil said, "You mean a sixth century Chinese one?"

Captain Anderson was half listening while he stared at Angela, who was walking away. He said, "Um. . . over there. Put your stuff over there will be fine, for now, I guess. The Colonel is coming in a couple of weeks and we'll see what he says about having kids in here."

The area Anderson picked out was at the back wall. Phil thought it was probably the same place he would have chosen. Phil left, happy over the acceptance of the Academy. He looked for Angela. "Cadet!"

Angela turned and saluted the most casual of salutes. "Yes sir."

"Cadet, I can't be calling you "Cadet Angela". It just sounds bad. What is your real last name?"

"Cadet Crawford, sir."

Phil was tired of everything being called "Crawford", but he would make an exception on this one. He gave her a hug. She hugged him back and they both started laughing at the scene that they had caused.

Chapter 10

North of Dayton, Ohio

Elijah kept thinking, with each step, he was getting closer to finding out something about Rene and Matt. Something that he might not want to know.

First they had to get around Dayton. Or through it. All Elijah could think of was the words of Trevor C. Banks, who wandered into Crawfordton from Dayton maybe a year ago. He remembered Trevor saying, "People down there would eat the bark off of this here tree. They would eat this here grass. They eat road kill, and rats. They eat each other. They eat their own children or swap their children with somebody else to eat. They sell human meat for water. I don't know how Cincinnati is, Chicago is, Columbus is, man I used to love Dayton, but I ain't gonna lie to you, Dayton is some kinda hell on this earth up in there. I thought about doing it, eatin' the dead. . . but I didn't. I caught a damn buzzard. I ate some glue." Not the most encouraging of recollections.

Elijah's travel mates helped him keep up a decent pace. Traffic on the road was nil. Elijah thought that there was not much to feed off of in downtown Dayton. That equation left only cannibals in the city. Pretty much like Trevor C. Banks said.

"Dale," Elijah said, "You sure you want to take your wife and daughter down there? It is plenty scary for us, let alone for unarmed women."

"That's what I tried to tell her! You think she would listen?"

Pam said, "Dale, I didn't want our family to separate. Is that so bad?"

Elijah said, "No, it's not bad." He thought of Aliyah back in Crawfordton. Was he a bad husband? Was Dale a bad husband? Maybe his thinking was becoming cloudy because of malnutrition. He thought back over the span of the day. He was on autopilot, plodding forward without much caloric intake. "What about hiding the women here?"

Terri said, "No Mom!"

Pam said, "Elijah, we'd just as soon go with Dale. He could use our help. If we go down, I would rather go down together."

Dale said, "Me 'n Elijah got weapons. We can make it."

Elijah said, "The hand guns don't mean nothin'. We gotta travel at night so no one with a rifle can scope us out. I think there are the worst kind in the City there who will jump at the chance to shoot us.

"We're wasting time," Dale said.

Elijah said, "We got to play it smart, Dale. It don't do no good to hurry up and get shot."

"You listen to Elijah, Dale. He knows about this stuff." You're just a chicken farmer.

"Chicken farmer?" Elijah asked. "In my book, chickens are vital. Let's go find somewhere we can get out of this wind and take a nap until nightfall. You can tell me all about how you raise chickens. It won't be but a couple more hours of daylight this time of year anyhow."

They went off of the highway. After hopping a fence they came across an old building that stored an old tractor. They were getting ready to go into the building.

Pam said, "Hey Dale! Look. Wild parsnips."

"Sure enough," Dale said. "Let's dig them up. They are good the year round."

"Nice work, Pam," Elijah said. "I would have never, ever seen that."

"Thanks, city boy."

Elijah remembered how much he absolutely hated parsnips. There were a lot of them growing there. Wild ones certainly wouldn't be any better than the garden variety.

They each got their knives out and got some dug up. Dale went and washed them in a ditch by swishing the bunch back and forth really fast. They looked as clean as the ones from the grocery store. At least the dirty water had to be a lot better than the chunks of dirt that were on the white root vegetables.

"Mmm. . .yummy. These taste just like. . .kerosene carrots," Elijah said. He found himself missing the iconic Crawfordton soybean soup.

"Yea," Dale said. "They ain't real bad. Wanna hear about chicken farming now, Elijah?"

"Of course," Elijah said.

"Well, we got forty thousand head. Well, we did anyhow, but we had to take them all out of the cages."

"You took forty thousand chickens out of cages?" Elijah found this incredible, but he was too tired to think about any of it and fell asleep while Dale told him how his farm went down the tubes."

It seemed like only minutes until Dale woke Elijah up and told him it was dark out. So they went back up on the highway and started heading south again. It was very dark and quiet.

Dale said, "We gotta remember where we got those parsnips for on the way back."

Elijah was grateful for the meal, but was not going to commit too much of his gray matter to recalling the exact location of the nasty things. "Okay," Elijah said, "we've got to be as quiet as possible."

It took what seemed to be over an hour from where they started to get to the downtown part of Dayton. It was an eerie feeling, walking on the interstate in the dark among the tall buildings. There was no lighting, but they could still make out the silhouettes of the massive buildings of downtown Dayton against the sky. It was a feeling of smallness and vulnerability. Yet, if it were daytime, this walk would be dangerous to the point of being foolhardy.

"Elijah," Terri whispered. There's another road over here.

"What?"

"Yea, look. Which way is the exit?" It was so dark that they could not tell which lanes were the thru lanes and which ones were the exit. Normally, the exits were on the right, but not always.

Pam said, "We have to walk across and see which direction has the most lanes and follow it." Typically, the exit was one or two lanes while the main path was at least four lanes.

"Good idea," Elijah said.

This extra measure took extra time, but they definitely did not want to get off of I-75. That could mean a very long amount of extra walking and many added miles to the trip by going the wrong way.

"Listen," Dale whispered.

"Yea," Terri whispered. "Sounds like shooting. This is suckish."

Elijah said in a hushed tone, "I think we're going to be okay."

Within a couple of more hours of walking they found the correct path south on I-75 and had managed to avoid any problems. Elijah would definitely remember to go through Dayton only at night on the way back.

Elijah kept thinking, It would be a very long walk back if it was bad news in Fairfield, where Rene and Matt lived.

Chapter 11

Crawfordton

"Hey zombie!" Zach, a kid who was about Angela's age in the neighborhood yelled at Angela in a hateful tone. Zach had made taunting and calling Angela names a daily habit. "You eat anybody today?"

"No," Angela said. "Man. I am really hungry right now though."

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just dinner time. I haven't had a nice piece of meat in awhile."

"So? Why you tellin' me, zombie?!"

"You asked, didn't you?"

"You're stupid!"

"Can you do me a favor?" Angela moved closer.

"No! I hate you!"

She moved closer.

"Get away!"

Angela said, are you too chicken to show me your big arm muscle?"

"No stupid, why would I be?"

"I guess you must be chicken, or just don't want to show off."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, you just seem a little wimpy for a boy."

"Shut up! I'll show you, zombie! I ain't afraid of nothin'!" Zach took off his coat and rolled up his sleeve. He raised his arm and flexed his bicep.

Angela pulled her hand out her coat pocket and produced a salt shaker. She started shaking the salt on Zach's bicep.

"Hey! What's that supposed to do, stupid?"

Then with her other hand she pulled out an opened pocket knife.

"Hey! No!" Zach jerked his arm away and went running without his coat. "Help! Zombie! Help!"

"Hey!" Angela yelled. "You forgot your. . . brain. '[The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting](#)'." She stood there awhile, feeling quite supreme, and was thinking about what creative thing to do with Zach's coat.



The children in Crawfordton all had free schooling available to them. Attendance was not compulsory, and many did not attend. Beyond the free schooling, Crawfordton now had the Military Academy. The goal of the Academy was to train children discipline, and make sure they got a top-notch education and leadership skills. Military Strategy and Tactics was also to be taught. Phil had a personal collection of US Army and Marine Corps manuals that served as lesson plans.

Admission to the Academy was by application only. The first cadet was a no-brainer; Angela. The next one was Hunter Thomas. Phil had always thought a lot of Hunter and believed he had great potential, while others only saw an overly exuberant continually distracted little kid.

Phil promised Sophia Thomas that he would help train her boys, but he was not so sure if he would be able to do anything with Liam. Liam seemed like he was kind of "out there", and a little too young. Nevertheless, Phil still made him a Cadet in the Military Academy.

The only other cadet was Mike. Cadet Mike was a quiet kid, from Christian parents who worked nonstop. His parents were proud that Mike would study under Phil at the Academy and considered it an honor and privilege.

One of the first things the cadets were taught was to be in uniform. The "uniform" was just a do-rag in the fashion of Lieutenant Angel Howard, the best soldier that Phil had ever personally known. The rule was that at all Academy functions, the do-rag was to be worn, unless the cadet was on a spy mission.

Rule number two was that the cadet had to salute any officers while in uniform, whether they be Crawfordton Guard, Ohio Confederation, or Academy Officers, which meant Phil. Phil also wore a do-rag while at the Academy. Phil didn't salute anyone.

One of the first things the Cadets got to do was shoot. But they started out with a kid-sized BB (Ball Bearing) rifle. All the firearm safety rules were safely taught to children using this barely lethal weapon.

Liam became impatient and started whining and pouting that he had to wait his turn to shoot. Phil told him to wait his turn and he whined some more, so Phil sent him home.

Hunter said, "Mom is going to be so mad."

Phil said, "You saw what he was doing, we won't have that here."

"No Phil. . .Commandant, Mom said we better *listen*, or she would make us regret it."

Sure enough, Liam came back about ten minutes later, whimpering.

Phil said, "Is there a problem, Cadet?"

"No, Commandant."

"Get down there and start doing some pushups! Then you can shoot the gun! Let's go Cadet! Next time you better listen or I'll make you clean toilets!"

Liam got a smile on his face and the other Cadets started giggling.

"Keep going Cadet! I feel a big stinky one coming on and I need someone who doesn't listen to clean the toilet! Is that you, Cadet?"

"No Commandant."

"Louder! Don't stop!"

"No Commandant!"

Hey! These other Cadets had some stinky food while you were gone kissing your Mom! Now they have to crap really bad!"

The other Cadets were doubling over with laughter.

"Are-you-the-toi-let-clean-er?!"

"NO COMMANDANT!" Liam was struggling hard with the pushups, and was cheating badly to keep going.

"Now get up, you sorry excuse for a Cadet! Mike! Help this Cadet out! Get over there and shoot before I change my mind!"

"YES COMMANDANT!"

Chapter 12

One Week Later - North Side of Greater Cincinnati

There was a small road sign that had its original message spray painted over in white. In black words, it read, "Ohio Confederation Post. WARNING: Show Your Hands!"

"Look," Terri said, "there's Confederation troops up there!"

"That's good, right?" Pam asked.

"Maybe," Elijah said. "But we better do like the sign says." They raised their hands.

They could see one guard watching them, then a half dozen more popped their heads up behind some fortifications in the middle of the road.

Dale said, "Those guys are pointing their guns at us. I don't know."

Elijah said, "I guess we should expect them to act that way, right?"

A soldier advanced toward them, "Where you folks planning on going?"

"Cincinnati," Pam said.

"Fairfield," Elijah said.

The Soldier looked them over. "You can put your hands down. I have to advise you that this is the southern end of the Confederation. Beyond this is unorganized territory. I can't recommend going to either of those places. Especially Cincinnati."

Pam said, "We gotta try and find out son." Her voice was breaking a little, fearing the journey would end without finishing.

"Ma'am, I'm not going to stop you, I'm just advising you. Just be advised that we won't even go down there ourselves. We would like some information about what is going on down there, but we have seen quite a few people go south beyond this point and have not seen a single person return."

Pam started crying. Dale held her close.

"Pam," Dale said, "at this stage of the game, we gotta go. If we go down, we go down together."

"No Dad!" Terri started crying. "You'll both die!"

Dale said, "We made it this far." He told Terri, "I want you to stay here and wait for us to come back."

"No, Dad! Is Bobby more important than me?"

"No Terri. Please don't say that."

Terri said, "What if Bobby's not there, or . . ."

The soldier spoke up, "We don't provide any provisions or special protection for people who choose to stay here, sir."

"Never mind that!" Dale said, "Just make sure no one tries any funny business with her!"

Dale pulled Terri's head close to his. "I love you."

Pam joined them in the hug.

"Elijah," Dale said, "I want to ask a favor of you."

"What's that, Dale?"

"When you come back this way, if Terri is here, I want you to take her back with you to that fake town up north."

"Crawfordton."

"Yes, Crawfordton."

Elijah asked, "What if you are just a bit behind me?"

"Never mind that, we'll come up to Crawfordton and get her. I want her to stay safe. She's our treasure."

"Okay. I promise."

Terri started crying as if she believed she would never see her parents again.

Pam said, "Thank you Elijah, for all of your help."

"You too," Elijah said. "Hope you find Bobby."

"Good luck with your Daughter," Dale said.

Elijah shook Dale's hand and hugged Pam. Then he turned to the west toward Fairfield, Ohio.

A feeling of exhilaration pulsed through Elijah's old body. He was a half day away from being at Rene and Matt's. One minute he was happy, the next minute he was totally afraid.

Now was not the time to get careless. It was time to heed the warnings of the Confederation soldier at the end of the line checkpoint. Fortunately, this area was largely undeveloped. This was the main reason Rene liked it here so much.

The topography was flat with small hills in places. There was not much tree growth covering the hills. The bottom line was that there was not too much of a threat of being bushwhacked in the area at point blank range.

It was starting to get late. Elijah was thinking about finding a cozy spot to hide out for the night. He could not approach any homes in Fairfield at night.

He had a can of *Beefaroni* in his pack he had carried all that way. He was thinking about opening it. Maybe this would be his last chance to partake of such a delight.

A bullet whizzed by his head and he heard a pop. He immediately went to the ground and was trying to look around. "Dang it!" He could not see where the shooter was. There were so many possibilities. That shooter was going to get another shot at him and he couldn't do anything to stop it.

Elijah ran down the hill towards a single tree next the road. He could only hope he was running in a favorable direction. He tried to zigzag enough to make another shot as difficult as possible, but still maintained some speed. He made it to the tree. He was looking around, waiting for another shot. He couldn't see anyone anywhere. His line of sight was clear in all directions. He waited for the longest time. There was no one. Now he wasn't sure it was a gunshot in the first place. He feigned leaving the tree sanctuary a couple of times then jumped back to see if the assailant was still trying to get a bead on him. Nothing. Just to play it safe, Elijah started running off toward his originally intended destination. He was concerned about expending too much energy, since he did not have much in the way of food, except the *Beefaroni*.

Elijah came to a small cluster of intentionally planted trees and ran into it to try and scramble his trail, just in case the ghoul was stalking him. Once among the trees, he decided it was a good opportunity to get reacquainted with the *Beefaroni*. He pulled the tab and ripped the lid off of the can. Even at room temperature the aroma was exquisite. The pasta texture was a little soft from being so old, but it was still commercially sterile.

Elijah savored every nostalgic bite. After finishing the treat he reflected on years gone by. How people took their daily meals for granted. How America was blessed

with so much, yet chose to throw it all away by their neglect.

Finishing the can was another small weight off of his pack that would no longer need to be carried. Also, it was another bit of loot that someone else would not be rewarded with if the next bullet found its target.

It was getting very dark. Elijah wanted to finish the journey so bad that he couldn't contain himself. But it was too risky. He would have to sit in the trees until morning.

Now Elijah was wide awake. He thought he would never be able to get any sleep. It turns out that he made a huge pile of pine needles and burrowed into it, and it was comfy warm. The next thing he knew it was morning.

All this way Elijah came. He was within a couple of miles from the destination. He started passing some apartment buildings on the edge of town. One was burned out. He could see people looking down on him. Potential trouble lurked all around him. Elijah knew that some might try to kill him just for a chance to see what was in his pack.

As usual, the side of the road was lined with abandoned cars. The last thing he wanted to do was to get off of the street and be attacked by either fearful or opportunistic assailants.

He saw human remains in the middle of the street. Not all of each of the body's remains were there. He looked up at the apartments and condos to see if there were any imminent threats.

He was in *the* neighborhood. It was incredible to think that he accomplished it. He wished he could phone Aliyah right now. Was this the building? They all looked the same, but a little different. Hmm. . . not yet.

There it is! Apartment 413! Their apartment was on the second story. Elijah went up the walkway. He saw a sign on the door, but it was too far away to read. He went up the stairs on the side and was at the door he had been looking for, and thinking about all this time. The sign read, "Keep Out!" It was written badly. It looked like a third grader had written it.

Elijah knocked on the door. He did it harder and harder. "Dang it! Rene! Open up! It's me!" He hated to make so much noise and end up drawing unwanted attention.

He beat on the door some more. Whawazat? He thought he heard a voice. Maybe it was an animal. Elijah couldn't just stand outside and let everyone in the neighborhood contemplate the best method of robbing or killing him.

Guess it was time to act like a cop and bust down the door. Busting doors was a lot easier with the proper equipment. Here goes. . .

Chapter 13

Crawfordton

The four Cadets were on their way to the Fort Wilcox Military Academy from the Crawfordton Public School.

Every time Angela turned around, Mike was uncomfortably close. He didn't say much, but was about as consistent as a shadow.

Hunter was always trying to be in the middle of whatever was going on. Hunter's younger brother Liam was always looking around dreaming about something.

"Hey rag-heads!" It was Zach and two of his friends. The boys were older and bigger than the cadets.

The Cadets looked at them, and just kept walking.

"OOOO! Look at the badass rag-heads, with their zombie."

"Hey! Shut up!" Hunter said.

"Hey! Why don't you make me, wimp!"

Angela walked up to Zach. Mike followed. Then the others.

Angela said, "Hey Zach. Remember the knife?"

"So? How do you know we don't have knives?"

Angela said, "Do you really know how to use a knife you ignorant bastard?"

"Hey! I know how to cut!"

"Really? Do you know how to carve up a body and take all of the flesh off of the bone? Do you know how to bust open the skull and suck the brains out of a head? Do you know how to chew up the flesh and crap it all out the next day?"

The older boys winced. One of them held his stomach and said, "I'm outta here." Then they both walked off, hoping to be forgotten.

"Hey, where you going?" Zach said to his wilting allies.

Angela got closer to Zach. She put her hand in the same pocket that produced the knife the last time. "That's you I'm talking about, you stupid son of a bitch. I promise

you I am going to turn your ugly face into manure for our garden if you come anywhere near any of us. Do you follow what I'm saying?"

Zach was speechless.

Mike got in front of Angela. His nose almost touched Zach's nose. He said, "I'm hungry too, bitch."

Hunter chimed in, "I'm starved!"

Zach backed up slowly started walking fast in the direction of his demoralized friends.

Angela said, "Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."

"Huh?" Mike said.

"That's out of *Art of War*. It's a book. If you do what is in it, you will win every time. None of you guys tell Phil about this? K?"

Mike told Angela, "What's that guy's deal?"

Angela said, "He don't like me much. Can't you tell."

"Well. . . I like you."

"Why?"

"'Cuz."

"'Cuz why?"

Mike just shrugged his shoulders.

Angela said, "You don't make any sense."

Mike asked, "You really didn't eat people, right?"

Angela said, "What do you think?"

"Umm. . . I don't know."

Angela said, "The important thing is that he *believes* I would do it, right?"

"Yea, I guess. You're pretty smart, for a girl."

"C'mon Mike, I'm smarter than you."

"No you're not."

"Mike. Seriously?"

"You just *think* you are."

"I *think* I am, because I *am*."

"Whatever."

They walked quietly toward the Academy.

Mike said, "If someone did eat another person, do you think they would taste. . .yucky?"

"I know Zach would taste yucky," Angela said.

They started laughing.

Hunter said, "Yea, he would give me the runs."

Liam started laughing. He swatted Hunter, who swatted him back.

Commandant Crawford was waiting at the Fort on the Cadets. There were no clocks in use in the community, so the delay caused by the confrontation went unnoticed by Phil. "We got work today, Cadets. Let's start building our Academy. We have to go out and scavenge for building materials. We'll get whatever we can and bring them back here."

Liam said, "Can we shoot again? I want to shoot!"

Phil said, "First, we get some of the building started. If that goes okay, we may do some shooting. I've got some lunch here from Amy for everyone."

Liam saluted, "Okay, Commandant."

Hunter said, "Liam wants to clean toilets."

The Cadets started laughing.

"Crawford!" It was Captain Anderson hobbling along. You missed the Colonel. Actually he was pretty happy with our Academy. Next spring he wants to send some more students to it. He'll get some money to pay for it."

Phil was taken aback by the notion that the Academy somehow was the work of both Anderson and himself. "I thought he wouldn't want any kids?"

"He says your kids can stay, but he will be sending mostly officers candidates, you know, *real* cadets to the academy. He is also going to send a couple more instructors."

"*We* really got something going here, huh?"

"I'll say. The Colonel talks like I can expect a promotion."

Phil wondered how this would all work out, but time would tell. He could always revolt later.

Chapter 14

Fairfield, Ohio

Elijah successfully kicked the door in on the second try. He quietly walked entered. The apartment had a nasty sewer smell to it. Kind of like rotting protein, or a dead body. The apartment was a mess. The mess was an organized mess. It looked like it was being lived in, not ransacked.

"Rene. You here? it's. . ."

At that instant Elijah felt a sharp pain on his upper back. He had been struck by a blunt object. He kept on his feet. Before he could get turned around to see what he was up against he was hit in the back of the leg. He went down.

He saw a young boy standing over him with a baseball bat. He saw that the boy had the bat raised for another swing.

"Wait!" Elijah held up his hands.

Another young boy pounced on Elijah with a butcher knife. He held the knife to Elijah's throat. Then he found Elijah's pistol and removed it from the holster.

The boy with the bat said, "Can't you read?! Keep out! I am really mad with you. I am going to kill you!"

"No!" Elijah said. "I'm only here looking for my daughter."
"Why?! So you can eat her?! Or did you come in here to eat us?!"

"No, I don't eat people, I never have. It's like I told you, I'm looking for my daughter, Rene."

"The boy with the knife screamed, "How do you know her name?!"

"She's my daughter."

"Yea, right!" He raised the baseball bat.

Elijah held up his hands, "Boys, now you've got this all wrong. I'm only here to find Rene and Matt."

The younger boy with the knife said, "He does kind of look like Rene, but he doesn't look anything like Matt."

"I'm not Matt's father, I'm Rene's father."

"Prove it!" the older boy with the bat said.

"Her name is Rene and she is married to Matt! Now how else would I know that? It's not written on the front door, you know."

The boy with the bat said, "Well you're too late! You should have been here a long time ago!"

"Why!? What did you do to her!?"

"Not us! We had nothing to do with it!"

Elijah grabbed the kid's arm that was holding the knife and twisted it. The kid screamed, and the knife dropped. The boy rolled away, holding his arm in pain.

Elijah sat up. "Okay, now. You mind tellin' me what happened then?"

"Raymond and I, we lived a few apartments down. We came here to Matt for protection. And Rene had a gun that she got from her. . ."

"Me. I gave her the gun. Now go on."

The boy relaxed and sat on the couch. "They tried to get us. There were a lot of them. They broke in and Rene kept shooting at them. They were shooting back." Matt was hitting them with this ball bat.

Elijah looked at the back of the "Keep Out" sign and saw that the sign covered a couple of bullet holes were put into the window.

Rene and Matt fought them and killed them all but they were both hurt. They got shot. They both died.

Elijah hung his head. "No. My baby. My baby. Are you sure? They both. . .are gone? He started crying. "Why!? Why did they want in here so bad?!" He didn't want to think about what happened to their bodies.

"Waaaaa!" a baby cried.

Elijah was confounded by the situation. "What? Who?"

The oldest boy said, "Katy! It's okay! You can come out now!"

Katy, a scared little blonde haired girl slowly came out holding a baby.

The boy on the couch said, "This is your grandbaby."

"What? I got a grandbaby?" Elijah fell flat on the floor and lost it, trying to take this overload of information all in. He held his eyes and let the tears out. Then he got

back up.

I . . I. You boys here. . . and girl, you saved my grandbaby? Let me see. . . her."

"Him," the older boy said, "They never got around to naming him."

Katy pulled the baby away.

"It's okay, Katy," the boy said. "Let him see his grandson."

Katy brought the baby to Elijah. The baby stared at Elijah. He gazed upon the eyes of his grandson. For an instant he had the feeling that he was looking into Rene's eyes.

The baby appeared to be in good health, maybe a little lightweight, probably ready for some solid food. It was so surrealistic. Did all of this really just happen?

Elijah asked the older boy, "What's your name, son?"

"Mitch."

"And you're Raymond?"

Raymond nodded in the affirmative.

"I'll call the baby, Mitchell Raymond Mayweather, after you, men."

"You are naming the baby after me?" Mitch said. "Wowwww."

"And me?" Raymond said, in amazement. "His name is bigger than he is."

"He should be named after you, you men are heroes. You know that, don't you? I guarantee Rene would be so proud of you boys and eternally happy that you saved Mitchell Raymond's little life. And you know what? So am I."

"Wow! 'Mitchell Raymond!' You hear that Mitchell?"

Mitch said, "I didn't really think I was a hero, I just felt like a mommy."

"Mommies are heroes too, you know. How did you do it?"

"Well, Matt went down to the messed up store and there was a couple of crushed cases of powdered baby formula still there so he grabbed it all, along with some regular food that was buried under the mess, and brought it here. We used mirrors and the sun to warm up the baby formula the best we could. We kept the door locked and just lived with what we had."

Elijah asked, "What did you do for water?"

"When things started going bad, Matt filled up the bathtub full of water and started filling up everything he could with water. He knew the power was going to go out and there would be no running water to drink. That lasted quite awhile, but it ran out, so then we would drink dirty water off of the roof. You get used to it."

"Good work, Matt," Elijah mumbled.

Elijah now realized the context of the smell in the place. Just old fashioned dirty diapers. "You boys are amazing. Now we have to get out of here."

"We can't do that," Mitch said.

"Why not?"

"It's not safe. And we got nowhere to go."

"You can't stay here. You will run out of everything, then what? You have been in here so long that you can't imagine anything else. I'll take you all back to Crawfordton with me."

Mitch said, "You can't trust anybody."

"I know, but we'll leave at night so no one can see us. We'll be okay. I wouldn't have come here if I didn't think I would be able to get here and back. Don't you want to get out of here?"

"Yea," Raymond said. "I'll go to Crawfordton. It has to be better than here."

"Atta boy." Elijah could barely move from his battering when he tried to get up.

Mitch said, "Sorry about that. . ."

"Elijah. No no. I understand totally, you were just being protective, but I ain't gonna tell you it doesn't still hurt."

Mitch helped him up. "Here, lay on the couch."

"Oh, great. I haven't had the privilege for a long time. Let's all get some rest for now, then we'll pack up and get out of here."

It was not so impossible to believe that Rene and Matt had perished, but he would have never guessed, that he would be napping on a couch with his grandson when he got to Fairfield.

Chapter 15

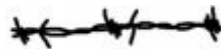
Crawfordton, in January

It became evident that someone had been abducting people from Crawfordton again. There was some evidence that the perpetrators were the Hexmen.

It was thought by some that the disappearances was the work of the Gofinns getting rid of any possible rivals. But Constable Colonel Jayden Phipps had a spy in Delburg working under the alias of Rocky Smillen. Nearby Delburg was controlled by the Gofinns. Smillen seemed to know everything about Delburg, but Smillen saw no evidence that the Gofinns were involved in any such activity. In fact, the Gofinns never seemed to go anywhere near Crawfordton. So Delburg was ruled out in the matter.

However, Smillen said people were also coming up missing from Delburg, a fact that could not be accepted. It was reported to Jayden that someone tried to, but failed to abduct a woman. When the woman's husband got a brief look at the man, the perpetrator had some kind of "symbol" tattoo on his face. This suggested that the perpetrators could be the Hexmen.

Since the Crawfordton Guard did such a good job of helping the Raiders to dislodge the Hexmen out of the Shanesville area, the Hexmen may have relocated closer to Crawfordton.



It was the coldest day of the season. It was so cold that school was cancelled and the around the clock sentries at the House were only sent out to do an occasional patrol.

Everyone in the House was staying near the fireplace. Both of the doorways leading into the room had blankets tacked up over them to keep the warm air in the room.

Angela was reading by firelight. Angela said, "It says right here, 'When the enemy is at ease, be able to weary him; when well fed, to starve him; when at rest, to make him move. Appear at places to which he must hasten; move swiftly where he does not expect you.'"

"Aren't you sick of this book yet?" Phil asked, trying to take a nap.

"No. Why do you keep saying that?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . maybe because you have read that thing for half a year."

Angela quoted again, "[The general who wins the battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought. The general who loses makes but few calculations beforehand.](#)"

"So you're a General now, and this House is a temple?"

Angela said, "If we hit the Hexmen now, they will be easily destroyed."

Phil sighed, "But also, we have to know when to fight. It is too cold out. Our people will freeze to death out in that. And I don't know if anyone knows where the Hexmen are. Those Hexpukes are suffering a lot worse than we are right now."

Angela said, "Fine!"

Phil asked, "What?"

"Nothing. I'm going to Hunter's house."

"Just stay here. It's too cold out."

"Fine. Let's talk some more."

"Okay, okay. Go ahead and go out. Don't stay too long?"

"Why not?"

"I want you back here, that's why."

Angela went to her clothes pile by her bed on the floor and found more garments to put on, adding multiple layers. Then she put on her warmest coat, gloves, hat and boots.

She went across Harris Road to the Thomas's house. The snow had piled up over the past couple of weeks and none of it had melted. Angela wondered what everyone's big deal was with the cold. As long as you dressed for it, the cold wasn't that bad.

Much of the Thomas house was not habitable because of the destroyed roof. Angela knocked on the door. Sophia came to the door and let her in. They had to pass through the front room that had a partial roof over it. Snow was all over the floor. They made their way past some crude makeshift repairs to an inner sanctum of the house.

The house also had a fireplace. The room was packed with heat seeking people. It was nice and warm in the room, almost hot.

Angela waded over the people, many who gave her a hostile glare, until she found Hunter. "Hunter!"

"What are you doing here?"

"We have something important to do."

"Me too. Stay warm."

"It's business." She gave Hunter a token kick in the butt.

"Okay. Okay."

She motioned for him to go into the snowy living room. He put on his coat and followed her.

Angela said, "We gotta go do something."

"Why?"

"Do you want to keep the Hexmen away?"

"I dunno. Are they here?"

"No, but what if they come here?"

"Today? They gotta be near a fire somewhere."

"I know. That is how we will find them."

"Find them!"

"Shhhhhhh! Shush!"

"Why would I want to find them? You don't make any sense."

"So the army can get them."

"Why don't they do it themselves?"

"They're a bunch of babies."

"No they're not."

"Come on."

"Let me tell my Mom first."

"No. You can't"

"She's gonna be so mad."

"She'll get over it. Go get some more warm clothes, let's go."

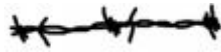
"Okay. Hang on. Man, what a . . ."

"Soonzoo says, 'If fighting is sure to result in victory, then you must fight, even though the ruler forbid it.'"

"Sounds like Sunzoo got into a lot of trouble."

"No. If you win, people forget about it. I think."

The days were very short and the two Cadets headed out into the darkness straight north up Harris Road, which was more of a random first place to look than anything else.



Amy nudged Phil, who was getting a nap. She asked Phil, "Where's Angela?"

"She's over at Thomas's."

"Well go get her. I want her over here now."

Phil grumbled. "All right." Phil didn't dress overly warm since it was a short trip, but before he got across the road he regretted it. He knocked on Thomas's door.

Sophia opened it. "Hi Phil."

"Hi."

"Come in and get warmed up."

They meandered through the baffled mess until they got to the heated area.

"Thanks. Where's Angela? I want her to come back home now."

"Angela? She's not here. Neither is Hunter. Liam! Have you seen Hunter?"

"No."

"Phil. What's going on? Where's Liam?"

"I don't know. Dang it! This really gets me! Don't worry Sophia, I'll get to the bottom of this."

Phil returned back at his house and burst open the door. He let a big burst of cold air into the House. He was welcomed with a chorus of "Shut the door!"

"I can't find Angela!"

Amy said, "Whaaaa. . ."

"Sophia can't find Hunter, either. Check the House!" Phil said. "Angela! Angela! Get in here! Dang it!"

They looked through the house.

"Jayden!" Phil said, "You gotta sound the rally bell!"

"Now wait a minute, Phil. We can't just send everyone out in this. Just because this is your kid. . ."

Phil snarled, "If this was any other kid, what would you do?"

Jayden dropped his head. He told a sentry who was spending his outside time warming up inside instead, "Private, go toll the rally bell."

Amy said, "Phil, can't we get the Confederation to help out?"

Jayden interrupted, "They won't help with this. This is our problem."

Amy pleaded, "What if someone took her? What good are they?"

Jayden said, "Oh maybe you're right. I'll go talk to Anderson."

Throughout the town, grumbling and groaning was pervasive as the Guard members heard the bell and readied themselves to meet at the rally point at the House.

After they arrived at the rally point, each platoon was given an area of the town to check for the children. Once completed, each platoon was to report back to the rally point. If no one had seen the children, then all the platoons were to head out of town in an assigned direction the distance of not more than three miles. If they saw nothing, they were to come back.

Jayden still had not promoted anyone to Captain yet to fill Henry Miller's position. Jayden thought that appointing a Captain may not be necessary at this point, since the Guard was now a smaller force.

Chapter 16

Guard Platoon-D, under Lieutenant Murphy, was in charge of searching for the missing children in the north section of town. Murphy was glad that they were down to the last couple of homes to check. Sadly, they were disappointed to find that an older man had frozen to death in his shanty. Most of the shanties were abandoned and people were stuffed in front of fireplaces. Not this guy. He was too pigheaded to get help with anything, so he died of hypothermia.

"Lieutenant!"

"Yea, Sergeant."

"There is a pair of kid-sized tracks going due north up the road."

"Take your squad and follow them. Bring them back. Good work. Everyone else, let's head back to H.Q.."

Murmurs were heard through Platoon-D's troops. Some were relieved to be able to go home, while others disappointed that they had to suffer in the miserable cold at least awhile longer.

Sergeant Benson thought that at least his squad would not have to go the full three miles if he could catch the children. Some of the men suggested that they jog to try and catch the children a little quicker.

The squad kept up the pace. The men were about a mile up the road.

"Sergeant! There they are!"

Benson called out to the children, "Halt! Stop!"

Angela and Hunter stopped and turned around.

"Hold it right there, kids!"

Angela and Hunter stood there waiting for the squad.

Sgt. Benson said, "You kids caused a lot of trouble. What are you doing out here?"

"Looking for Hexmen," Hunter said.

Benson was confused by the answer. "You're done looking now, you're coming back to see Phil Crawford."

"Crap," Angela said.

"Crap is right," Benson said, breathing heavily after the jog in his heavy clothes with his rifle. "Let's go, kids."

Angela realized that these guys were tired. The first moment no one was looking she took off running to the north. Hunter didn't even see her leave.

One of the privates said, "Hey. Where'd she. . . awww come on."

Sergeant Benson turned around, "Well! You let her get away, now go get her!"

The Private chased her a ways up the road he wasn't getting any closer, but he saw that she stopped. Now he was catching up.

"Okay, you done runnin' now?"

Angela held her finger over her mouth, then pointed down on the road.

The Private said, "Oooh Noo."

It was almost dark but for as far as they could see in the light, there were hundreds of tracks all running in the same direction across the road at a right angle to their path and into a woodlot that ran alongside the road.

The Private quietly said, "Run."

Angela and the Private both took off together. A couple of spears flew out from the woods at them. Misses. Then some arrows. An arrow hit Angela in the back. She kept on running. The Private was hit in the calf by an arrow and fell to the road.

Angela turned toward the screaming Private, Hundreds of Hexmen rushed out of the woods towards her. She resumed her escape. "Help! Help! God help me!"

One of the Hexmen ran a spear into the injured Private's chest.

A Hexman leader shouted, "No guns! No guns!" He did not want to draw attention.

It was too late. Sgt. Benson and his squad heard the commotion and commenced fire. Some of the Hexmen dropped.

The Hexman leader commanded, "Fire! Fire everything!"

Hexmen started firing and hit two of the Squad members.

Pull back! Benson ordered. They all started running south.

A couple of the faster ones were catching up to Angela.

Sergeant Benson turned and fired from a prone position while his men were escaping. He was hitting some of the faster Hexmen.

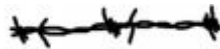
One particularly nasty Hexman grabbed Angela by the arm. She spun around and buried her pocket knife blade into his wrist. She withdrew the bloody blade and resumed running.

The Hexman held his cut wide-open wrist and was screaming in fear and pain.

Benson kept low and was hitting the Hexmen. The rest of the Hexmen stopped rushing forward. Benson told Angela to keep going. He had effectively single-handedly pinned them down, but there were so many that there were scores of them running alongside the road on both sides. They were outflanking Benson, and moving in towards him.

Then a salvo of semi-automatic gunfire erupted from the rest of Platoon-D who came to the rescue. Angela came running by them with the arrow sticking out of her back.

The Hexmen gathered themselves into a defensive line and were firing back. Platoon-D was pinned down.



Back at the rally point in town, all of the other platoons were still there waiting for Platoon-D and cussing out Angela in absentia.

Ella was standing near Jayden listening to all of the idle chatter. "Hey listen!"

They all got quiet. You could barely hear it.

Jayden said, "That sounds like World War Four going on over there! Everyone! Entire Guard Company! On me! On me!"

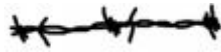
The entire Company suddenly was moving toward the battle.

Jayden said, "Ella! Go tell Anderson!"

The Company ran past Hunter who was not far from town. Then they five minutes later they ran past Angela who was running crazy fast toward town. Angela was no longer the priority.

The Guard got to the battle to relive Platoon-D. It was difficult to make out friend from foe in the dark. Not much more shooting took place. When it did, the shooting was generally at point blank range. Preston Martin was able to surprise a Hexman by plunging his combat knife into him. The encirclement of Platoon-D by the Hexmen was broken.

Before the Confederation Garrison got to the battle, the Hexmen had already broken off. They were ducking back into the woodlot.



Amy's face turned ghastly white when Angela came into the House with an arrow sticking out of her back. Amy almost passed out. "Ph. . .Phil."

Phil came into the room. "What the hell!? We gotta get you over to the clinic!"

The clinic was always opened by Dr. Williams whenever the rally bell tolled. The candles were already lit.

"Whoa! What in Devil's name?!" Dr. Aliyah Williams studied the arrow into her back. "Is this hurting you at all."

"Not much."

The Doctor touched the shaft of the arrow.

"Oww!" Angela said, and squirmed.

Dr. Williams said, "It doesn't seem to be bleeding much. I'm going to try and cut around it and see what we got. What about your arm here?"

"That's not my blood."

"Hmmm. . .Is that a fact?"

Dr. Williams started to cut around the arrow and the arrow fell on the floor. "That was pretty easy."

"Let's get this coat off so I can take a look." She took the coat off and lifted up the numerous layers of clothes. "Sorry, I know it's cold in here." The inspection revealing a small bloody scratch. "Well, at the risk of being called a 'band-aid station', I'm going to put on a band aid on it." She put on the band aid. "You're good to go."

Chapter 17

It was too cold to talk outside. Once they got back home the interrogation began in the radio room.

Phil said, "You almost scared your mother. . . Amy to death. I'm serious. She was worried sick over you. Then when you came home with. . . oh, what was that? An *arrow*, sticking out of your back? I thought she was going to have a stroke or something."

Angela said, "I am so sorry, but I was only doing the right thing?"

Amy interjected, saying, "How can any of this be the right thing? Did I miss something here? Let's get serious here. You had an *arrow* sticking out of your back when you got home. I hate to keep saying the same thing over and over Angela, but I wish you would act more like a young girl instead of some foul-mouthed pioneer or something."

Angela said, "Amy, I hate to keep disappointing you, but being a little girl is boring."

Phil sensed he was next on Amy's list. He asked Angela, "So why did you do it? Why did you go out?"

"The Art of War says 'If fighting is sure to result in victory, than you must fight, even though the ruler forbid it.'"

Phil said, "You are not a soldier, you are a child. Children should not be in war. None of that is your responsibility anyhow."

"Should anyone be in war? Someone had to lead and take the victory, but everyone said it was 'too cold' to go out. It sure wasn't 'too cold' for the entire Company to come out looking for me 'n Hunter. It wasn't 'too cold' for the Hexmen to be within two miles of our house."

Amy said, "Phil, I'm fed up with it. You keep making her worse and worse and now she is stirring up all kinds of trouble. What am I going to say to people? I want that 'Art and War' book burned, and I want that Academy shut down!" Amy left the room.

Phil looked at Angela in the eyes and said, "You knew you would get into a lot of trouble, didn't you?"

She nodded yes.

"I have to say, I respect your bold decision, but I don't like it. And even though you took a couple more years off of my lifespan, I am proud of you. It really is a weird sort of way for a young girl to act, or even a boy, but we won the battle, right?"

She nodded yes again.

"Never, be afraid to talk. Especially to me. No more quiet stuff."

"Yes Phil, we won the battle. We killed lots of Hexmen tonight, and we taught the rest of 'em not to screw around with us."

"We?"

"Yea, I had to cut one up pretty bad to get away." She showed the blood on her coat to Phil.

"What was that like?"

"I know you want me to say 'awful', but it was pretty dang good, to tell you the truth."

"How did you know to look north?"

"I didn't. I was just going to try there first because it was easy. But then I could smell them."

"You could *smell* the Hexmen?"

"Yea, maybe because there were so many of them. So I went toward them."

"I'm having a hard time taking all of this in. Why are you so concerned with winning wars and all?"

"I dunno. Maybe I just like to fight."

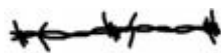
"You are an enigma." Phil gave her a hug. "I'm glad you come home safe. Please get that coat cleaned up and try not to get me into any more trouble. At least for awhile. You're starting to drive Amy nuts now."

"Okay, Phil.

"And let me hang on to 'The Art *and* War Book' for awhile. I won't burn it."

"Okay, Phil. I'll go get it." Angela knew most of it by memory anyway. "Are you going to shut down the Academy?"

"I think we need to take a couple of weeks off. It's billy hell cold out there anyhow."



The next day Sophia Thomas came knocking on the Crawford's door. Amy answered and invited her in.

"I would like to speak with Phil," Sophia said.

"Oh I know, dear, I hope you give him all kinds of the business. That's awful with the kids and all."

"Well Amy, I don't look at it quite that way."

"No? Some of our own people died, you know."

"I know, that was a shame, and the Cadets shouldn't go off on their own, but I asked Phil to train my boys so they would turn into capable men. I have to admit that some of what they have to do is tough for us mothers to accept, but now Hunter is already considered some kind of a war hero in town here."

Amy said, "He. . .uh huh, yes, I think. . .yes he is. It is really great, but you give Phil way too much credit."

"Oh no. All the boys talk about is their 'Commandant'."

"The Commandant?"

"Yea, that's what they call Phil."

Amy turned to the room being warmed by the fireplace. "Commandant! Someone is here to see you!"

"Hi Sophia."

"Phil, I just want to thank you for the great job you are doing with the Academy. I am so proud of Hunter."

Phil said, "Really? I was just thinking about closing it down."

"What!? You better not!," Sophia said, "We need that place."

Amy sighed. "No, we ain't shutting down anything. Maybe we ought to ban girls in it though."

"Amy no. That would be a bad idea. You know those boys have a lot of respect for Angela. They never say anything demeaning about girls now. To them, she is an equal. Well, I just came by to say 'thank you'. They really ought to let you know if they are doing something risky though."

"I totally agree. I'll see to it." Phil smiled, "You stop by any time."

Chapter 18

Dr. Aliyah Williams lived in their house alone now that Henry Miller had passed and Elijah was gone. Henry bought the house with the money that he and Elijah had earned.

The house had no fireplace, but on a normally cold winter night, she could bundle up in heavy clothes and blankets and end up being quite cozy. On colder nights, it was a real struggle to keep warm.

Aliyah missed having Henry around. There was no limit to the amount of suspicious characters who might try to invade her home. At times, Aliyah worried about Kevin and Todd, who lived in the William's old non-functioning van in their driveway. At best they were unscrupulous and unpredictable.

Colonel Jayden Phipps gave Aliyah Henry Miller's 9mm pistol for protection, but kept Henry's valuable automatic rifle for the Guard. Aliyah knew that her shooting skills were below weak, but she felt she could always "spray and pray".

She heard the door rattle. Her heart pounded. She couldn't find the pistol! She scrambled.

There were voices. . .The door opened!

"Liyah."

"Oh my God! 'Lijah!" Only Elijah called her "Liyah".

Elijah rushed to her in the bed. "I'm back 'Liyah."

They held each other tight.

Aliyah said, "I didn't think you would ever come back. I was so worried. Who else is with you, Rene? Rene? Is that. . ."

"It's not Rene, baby. . .Rene. . .and Matt. They didn't make it."

"Oh no, 'Lijah. Not our baby. Why? Damn it all."

She cried for several minutes. It's sad, but I ain't got no more tears. I guess all my hope was already gone. I knew it already. You should have listened."

"Hush now." Elijah held Aliyah close. He hated bringing her the bad news. "We got some friends here. Can we put on the candle?"

"There's a lighter on the stand next to the candle. Go ahead."

Elijah flicked on the lighter for a moment and started the large candle.

"You got some friends here?"

Elijah introduced Terri, the young woman abandoned at the Confederation Guard Post. Then he introduced Raymond, Mitch, and Katy.

"You sure make a lot of friends."

Elijah rolled up the black suitcase on its two wheels.

"You can unpack tomorrow. . ."

Elijah started unzipping the zipper, which was partway open.

Then he pulled back the blanket revealing the precious cargo in the suitcase. "I want to show you something." He unzipped the bag just enough to reveal Mitchell Ray's face.

"Ohhhhhhh!, that's not *something*, that's *someone*. it's a little one, Aliyah asked Terri, "Is this your baby?"

"No."

Elijah pulled out the baby. "Meet your Grandson, Aliyah."

"What?!"

Elijah nodded yes. He had a big smile on his face.

"No!?"

"Yes!"

"Oh you can't be serious! Oh my God! He looks like Rene! He is! 'Lijah you get him out of there and give me my child right now!" Aliyah took the Baby and snuggled in the covers with him.

"'Liyah, these young people saved Mitchell's life. I named him after Mitch and Ray. Katy here and Terri also helped. They saved his life 'Liyah."

"God bless you all . That was. . .was a miracle. I can't thank you enough. I want you all to stay here as long as you want."

Elijah said, "Where shall we put them up?"

"Sorry, 'Lijah, but Henry has passed on."

"What?!"

"He got killed in a fight with a clan."

"I can't believe it. How could they let that happen?"

"I know. It was a real shock. These days we are all getting all kinds of shocks. Guess we have to appreciate when something goes right." She couldn't take her eyes off of Mitchell. "So some of our guests can stay in Henry's room, or wherever else they can find a place. Thank you all. God bless your hearts. I'm sorry now it is not a good time for us to chat. Tomorrow will be better. Elijah, Mitchell Ray needs some solid food right now. Go start a fire so we can get some soybeans started for him." She gave a half-hearted smile at the entourage.

Elijah started a fire outside to cook the beans. Cooking the hard beans was a long process. He took the beans in to Aliyah to feed Mitchell Ray with.

Then after the fire burned down, he shoveled hot embers into a metal garbage can. He brought the can into the small bathroom to warm a smaller amount of air for Mitchell Raymond. Aliyah and Mitchell Raymond made a bed in the bathtub. It was cozy warm in the room. Aliyah invited Terri and Katy to sleep in the bathroom.

Elijah realized his home was completely different now.

Chapter 19

May - Crawfordton

After the long, frigid winter, Phil jumped at the chance to start getting his garden ready. Phil had baby plants already up and growing from seed. Each new season had the potential for a bumper crop, even after following a poor crop like the year before. At least they didn't consume all of their seeds during the winter months. No one was thought to have any extra food stock left, except maybe the Gofinns, who still had a large canned food stockpile.

Phil started the plants the month before and grew them in front of a southern facing window.

Phil taught the Cadets about gardening as well. Angela liked gardening, or doing anything for that matter, as long as Phil was involved.

Phil said, "Napoleon said, 'An army travels on its stomach'".

Hunter asked, "You mean they crawl?"

"No, son. I mean they have to have food to move. So if you have a big army it takes a lot of food to move them."

In spite of what Amy thought, the town started to accept Angela a little more. She was still considered some kind of crazy girl, but she had her place. Phil kept telling Angela that "People know when you like them, so she should start making an effort to like them first." Angela took the advice to heart, and the advice was starting to bear its fruit.

Angela loved gardening, but her true love was military science. She missed her *Art of War* so she tried to read *The Prince*, by Machiavelli, but it was too difficult for her to follow. But there were also some other military books in the library, such as ones covering battles in the War Between the States, and WWII.

Hunter and Liam were pulling weeds in the garden. Phil was digging small holes with his hoe and Mike was pouring a couple of dollops of water in the hole. Then Angela put baby plants into the wet holes.

"Phil, do you think I can get my book back." They both knew what book she was asking about.

"I don't know. Do you think you could read it responsibly?"

She sighed, "Yes, but it would be nice if someone would listen to me for a change."

"You gotta remember. Adults don't have to listen to what children say, even incredibly smart ones like you. But I can tell you this much, they will listen better now than the last time. Angela, you have to understand that Sun Tzu talks about doing 'many calculations' before taking an action."

"How do you know I didn't do that?"

Phil said, "I take that to mean that you talk it over with the other brains of the outfit."

"I did talk it over with you."

"But how does that count when I said it was a bad idea. You know the Bible says. *'In the multitude of counselors there is safety.'* Just talking to me is not 'multitude'. Before all of our battles you know we would have meetings with all of the leaders. I know you heard them talking."

Hunter said, "Angela said before we went looking for the Hexmen that as long as we were right, no one would say anything."

"Big mouth," Angela said.

"Fine," Phil said, "But there are different amounts of being right. Angela couldn't have been a hundred percent right when she ended up getting an arrow in the back."

Hunter said, "I was more right than her. I didn't get hit."

Mike said to Hunter, "No you were just more scared." Mike looked at Angela. "How come you took Hunter along and not me?"

"I don't know, Mike. I just did."

Mike said, "You should have asked me."

Angela said, "Yea probably, Mike. Because if you were there, you pr'y would have taken my arrow in your back, because you are always following me."

Phil chuckled at the exchange. He thought of how he and Amy must sound at times, so those two must be made for each other.

Mike said, "Don't you like me around you, Angie?"

Angela turned red. "I'm not Angie! I got too many names! I'm not Angela! I'm Ayanna! Mike! Call me Ayanna!"

Phil's jaw dropped. Hooray! He didn't have to keep the secret anymore.

Hunter said, "How come you're Ayanna now?"

"Because that's my name! I never said my name was 'Angela', did I?"

Mike said, "Phil, is her name really 'Ayanna'?"

Phil just shrugged his shoulders. "Welcome to talking to women, Mike. Keep me out of it."

Liam said, "My name's Randy!"

Hunter rolled his eyes.

Mike asked, "Phil, can I go now?"

"I need you here another hour or so. Just kidding. Sure son, go on."

Mike stomped away, clearly not happy with the discussion.

Hunter and Liam ran off to their home across the road.

Phil said, "Are you through being mean now?"

"What?" Ayanna said.

"You know, the reason you were named 'Angela' was because Amy named you that after someone we really think quite a lot of. As I recall, we couldn't get you to say much of anything. Now you want to act mean about it to your best friends. You better make it all right, starting with Amy. You better get into the House and tell Amy before she hears it from someone else, or she will be plenty hurt."

"Yea. I'm going right now. Then I'll talk to Mike, if I have to."

"If I were me, I'd make sure I did it. That 'crazy boy' thinks a lot of you for some dang reason."

Ayanna went into the House and looked around for Amy and didn't find her. Then she heard some clanking around in the back yard and found her there building a fire to make some lunch.

"What's for lunch," Amy?"

"I got some eggs down at Burkett's Store. You want some green onion in them?"

"Yea. Amy I want to tell you something."

"Yes, Baby. I'm all ears."

"Well, I know you named me Angela, which is okay, but I want to go by my real name now."

"Are you finally going to spit that secret out?"

"My name is Ayanna."

"Oh, Angela. . .I mean, A-yanna, that is such a beautiful name."

"Why did you keep it a secret for so long?"

"I thought that if no one knew my name they wouldn't know. . . you know. It didn't really make much sense. We good now?"

"We good now?" Amy gave her a hug. "Oh little darlin', thank you for telling me. I love you."

"I love you too. I told the boys that they should call me 'Ayanna', but you can call me Angela if you want, on account that you are special."

"Okay. . .Ayanna. You know I just love that name. It's a beautiful name for a beautiful young woman."

"Okay Amy, I'll be back for lunch. I gotta go see somebody for a minute."

"All right. You got some time."

Chapter 20

July

It seemed to most that Ohio never really had much of a spring. You go from winter right into the hot, humid summer. But the hot weather was good for making the garden grow like a jungle.

The bean fields that the majority worked on were doing better than the previous year, which was the initial manual labor year.

Those who tried to develop corn from the progeny of the hybrid seed had struggled the previous year. The hope was that the plants would be less of an unproductive mongrel than the previous year.

The overall wretched crop production caused a famine that was felt worldwide, since there was no exporting at all. Now the historically productive "corn belt" was keeping all that they produced. So the shortages were far worse elsewhere.

In Ayanna's eyes, the world was starting to fall into order. If anything, her new name was almost as if she was coming out with the new and improved version of herself. So instead of keeping it a secret, revealing her name was actually a kind of a reset to her reputation.

Ayanna had school, Academy, and her books. Phil gave her back her literary masterpiece, which was like her own twisted security blanket. She was reading *The Art of War*. "If you know your enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

Ayanna found Phil in the radio room. "Phil, we got three main enemies, right?"

"Yea. Gofinns, Axis, and Hexmen."

"Well we know a lot about the Gofinns and Axis, because we have spied on them. But what do we know about the Hexmen?"

"Not enough really. We don't know what they will do next. I think you are right, I better talk this over with Jayden."

"Hey! Why can't I talk it over too?!"

Phil started squirming. "Okay, let me think this over for a day and I'll get back with you."

"Phil. . ."

"No, I promise. We won't have another 'arrow in the back' outcome, so *don't* do anything stupid, or rash. I'll think of something."



The next day Phil woke up Ayanna, "Come on. We got something important to do. "What?"

"We gotta go work on the farm."

"The farm?"

"Yea, hush now and get ready."

"Nobody ever listens to me," Ayanna said.

They walked out heading north from Crawfordton. There was a farm that was just past Fort Wicox.

Angela saw a man out in a field at the farm. The guy looked familiar. He had kind of an unusual shape.

Phil said, "See that farmhouse?"

"Okay."

"Go in that door right there."

"Why?"

"Do it."

Ayanna approached the house, looking around. The man out in the field did not look at her at all. She looked back at Phil who was walking back to town. All of this gave her an uneasy feeling.

She went up the steps to the door, which was the back door of the house. She opened the door. At the kitchen table she saw a familiar face, Elijah Williams, who was sitting at the table staring at her. In front of him was a chessboard.

"Have a seat, Ayanna."

He knew her name. Not really a big surprise, but noteworthy, she thought. She sat down.

"It's your move."

"Is this some kind of test?" Ayanna asked, making a move.

"Would it be okay if I ask the questions, Ayanna?" Elijah moved.

"All right." She studied the board a bit and made a move.

"I know all about you."

"You do?"

"I think we are wasting your abilities. Would you agree?"

"Yes."

"But you are just a kid." Elijah said.

She looked up from the board at him in the eyes. Waiting on a negative comment.

Elijah continued, "We are in no position to waste any human assets, but you being a kid; most men, especially Guard or Confederation officers would never allow

themselves to be advised by a kid; especially a girl."

"Yea, I definitely get that."

"I am different than them," Elijah said. "Right is right no matter who it comes from. So, I want to make you an offer."

"You do?"

"I want you to join my team."

"What? You want me to be a spy?" Ayanna knew Elijah was in charge of spying. "I want to be a field marshal or general."

"You would be more than perfect as a spy. No one thinks a pretty little girl will be a spy. You can always be a general later."

"I'm not so pretty." She held up her ratty, uncombed long hair.

"You would have to let Amy fix you up if you want to work for me."

"So you want me to be a spy?"

"Maybe. But before you can do it, I need you to do some things."

"Like what?"

"You have to quit the Academy, and you have to start acting more 'girly'. I'm serious about that, it is critical."

"Hey! Did Amy put you up to this?!"

"I know how it sounds, it is not a trick. Look at this chessboard. Aren't you trying to get me to move my bishop over here? I won't because I know your rook is over here. What I want you to do, aside from this game, is to hide your own personal rook so no one can see it. If you think about it, it all works out."

Ayanna said, "It says in the *Art of War*, '[Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance.](#)'"

"You got it." Elijah realized that Ayanna was as sharp as everyone had said.

"Ayanna asked, "Suppose I do what you say, then what?"

"We give you a job here on the farm, which you come to every day after school. You might work outside a little, but most of the time you will be getting training, but also we talk intel and give our info to Jayden. Phil tells me you are really good at keeping a secret, which is for your own protection, and the team's safety as well. Secrecy is an absolute must. No exceptions."

Ayanna said. "Sometimes you look at the chessboard and you have to make an obvious choice." She laid down her king. "You got a deal, Elijah."

"Good, let's see how it goes. I want you to start effective now."

"All right."

Ayanna got back to the house. She saw Phil outside hauling some water from the rain water cistern to the garden. "How was work?" he asked, indicating that he was not going to be discussing any "farm" business.

"Good Phil. I love it."

"I really happy for you."

"Thanks Phil."

Ayanna went inside to Amy, who was trying to clean the floor with a brush and water.

"Hi Amy."

"Hi."

"Can you do my hair?"

"Absolutely! I thought you would never ask! Want to do it now?"

"Okay."

"Sit right here and I'll get my supplies."

Amy got a brush and was trying to undo the horrible ratty mess on top of Ayanna's head.

"Ow!"

"Sorry 'Yanna, but it is pretty messy."

"I know."

"Soooo. . ." Amy said, trying to concentrate on her work. "What made you want to get your hair fixed?"

"Umm. . . You know, people change."

"I think I'm going to trim it and pull it back a lot. Is it because of a boy, maybe?"

"No Amy!"

"Hold still now. I can't do a moving target."

"I'm not so sure I want to be in the Academy any more either."

"Really?"

"It's kind of boring. You know. . . all boy stuff."

"Yea, I knew a girl when I was little. She acted just like a boy, I guess because she had three brothers who picked on her. But then she grew up and had five kids. She really knew how to handle those kids. The one boy grew up to be a podiatrist."

"Podiatrist?"

"A Podiatrist is a foot doctor."

"They had doctors just for feet?"

"They had everything."

"There," Amy said, "that looks really nice. Go look in the mirror."

Ayanna went to the mirror. "Oh my gosh! That looks really like a girl. Hey, while you're at it, could you find me some girl clothes."

"I'll send Phil up in the attic. We might have some old clothes from our daughter up there."

Chapter 21

Phil brought down a couple of boxes of old clothes from the attic. Amy found an old skirt and top for Ayanna to wear at school.

After wearing the skirt, Ayanna finally figured out why Mike was hovering. The hovering only intensified. Now she was drawing all kinds of attention. Ayanna's new look in school was a hit.

Amy was still the school's teacher, and Phil was an assistant, but only on occasion. While at school, Amy noticed the various reactions to Ayanna's makeover and told her, "Maybe the skirt was a bit too much."

Later that day at home, Ayanna told Amy, "No. I like it. I want to keep wearing it." All Ayanna knew was that she was fulfilling her commission as an underground operative.

Amy said, "I think it needs let down a little. Phil might not like it."

"Why not?"

"We can talk about it later."



Phil invited Mitch to take Ayanna's place in the Academy. But Mitch wanted to learn to be a doctor so he chose rather to study with the doctors at the clinic. The doctors saw promise in him because of the way he took care of Mitchell Raymond Mayweather. In a couple of years, Mitch might have to do mandatory military service with the Confederation, but Phil thought maybe Mitch would get an exemption with his medical studies.

So Phil invited Raymond to join the Academy, and Raymond accepted. After school, Phil and the Cadets were on their way to the Academy at Fort Wilcox. The boys saw Ayanna on her way to the Farm.

Phil glanced at the boys. Every single one of them were gawking intently at her with a young predatory gawk. Phil shook his head.

When they arrived at the Academy they were greeted by Captain Anderson. The Cadets all gave him a salute. As promised, the Confederation supplied six additional students from around the Ohio Confederation. Funds were being provided by the

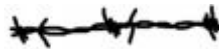
Confederation to construct a barracks next to the Academy for the out of town students to live in.

The incoming Cadets were older than the local ones. Phil thought that this new mix of students might ruin the already established chemistry among the students. He thought about his commitment to Sophia Thomas.

Phil introduced himself to the new Cadets. As he got to know them a little he found that they were excited to be there, and enthusiastic about their future in the Ohio Coalition Army.

But there was an exception. He spoke to Patrick, who just wanted out of the Academy and out of the Confederation Army. As a 20 year-old, Patrick Kelly was in the OCA because of his mandatory service obligation. His father wanted him to apply for the Academy, so he did, but his father's wishes was his only reason for applying. Patrick passed the entrance testing that was conducted easily, getting the top score. Already Patrick had gotten off on a bad foot with his fellow Cadets, who viewed him as toxic. He was so disengaged that Phil wondered if he was a possible suicide risk. All that potential, going to waste. Phil found this troubling and he couldn't stop thinking about him. They could not afford to lose such a potentially brilliant human resource.

To make matters worse, Phil found out that Captain Anderson was getting a promotion to Major. At least he would get re-deployed somewhere else.



When Ayanna showed up at the Farm, Elijah was pleased with the new look. "Good Work, Ayanna."

"Thank you, sir." She brought all of her military equipment and books with her in a bag, in an effort to change her image at home. "I'll just read gardening books at home."

"The only problem right now is with the skirt. You are here to work, so the skirt is out."

"Got it." She figured she could either change after school, or just wear pants to school.

"But today is fine, we will go out and do some shooting."

"Really?"

"Of course."

"The other thing is your ideas about the Hexmen. We can discuss them over another game of chess."

"Okay." Ayanna liked Elijah. Was going to the Farm supposed to be this much fun? She wondered how distasteful this 'work' was going to be, but it turned out to be extensive training in cop martial arts and army martial arts from Elijah.

Ayanna asked Elijah who the farmer was out in the field every day when she got to the Farm. All he would say was "What farmer?"



The next day Phil went up to Fort Wilcox to get ready for the classes. It had started to seem more like a job now. But today would be different. He was going to first pay Major Anderson a visit. He found him eating in one of the blockhouses.

"Major."

Anderson just looked at Phil, annoyed by the interruption.

"Congratulations on your promotion."

"What's up?"

"So I guess you'll be leaving soon."

"You guess right."

"I imagine that your claim that you started the Academy and your claim that you won the great victory over the Hexmen had quite a lot to do with your promotion."

"What's your point?"

"You know I don't really see it that way." Phil held up a piece of paper. "In fact, I've got a letter here, addressed to the Chairman of the Ohio Confederation that states you were negligent in your duties letting a clan of marauders so close to town and also how you were against the Academy from the get-go, and how you took credit for the design of the Fort. I have no idea why they would believe that whopper. "

"Why would you say all that. . . it's all lies."

"I fully intend to walk over to our one-legged Post Office Clerk and mail this completely believable letter unless you do the right thing."

"Oh really. What the hell is the 'right thing'?"

Phil held up another piece of paper, "Here's another document, 'Major Liar', from Doctor Williams of the Crawfordton Clinic that states Patrick Kelly is unfit for duty."

"What? Who's the liar now, Crawford?"

"The way I see it, this is a true statement. You obviously don't know, or care anything about any of your men here. Hey. . .I could add that to the letter."

What kind of hocus pocus are you trying to pull here?"

"Here's the deal. If you release Pat Kelly from the OCA, and the Academy, then I don't mail the letter. If you don't, I hope you like your new post in West Virginia on the front lines with the Axis."

"Why do you want Kelly so bad?"

"Never mind that. Deal?"

"What do I tell Kelly?"

"I'll tell him myself that he is being re-deployed to special service with the Crawfordton Guard."

"What if the Headquarters finds out?"

"Then it would look really bad on you, so I guess they better not find out."

Anderson said, "I'll do it; on one condition."

"Which is?"

"I want you out of the Academy, no 'Commandant' no nothing."

Phil thought about it. "Kelly and I will go get our stuff now."

Phil never thought of himself as a quitter, but in the last few years, he was deposed as a King, then refused the title of Constable, now he was giving up being a Commandant. Yeesh. But Phil did not live for titles and accolades. So he was now concerned with the Junior Cadets and his promise to Sophia.

Phil found Kelly, who was up early working on the barracks. "Kelly!"

"Yes Commandant."

"Get your stuff. All of it. We are out of here."

"Huh?"

"That's right. You're being reassigned."

"Oh great. Now what?"

"Let's go. I want to get out of here."

Pat Kelly had a backpack that held all of his worldly belongings. It was a short walk, to the Farm. "Where are we going?" Kelly asked.

Phil said, "You see that farmhouse over there?"

"Okay."

Phil stopped, so Pat also stopped. "Go in that back door of that house."

"Why?"

"This is the last time I will say this to you; I think. Because I said so."

Kelly walked up to the house. He saw a peculiar looking guy and a young girl out in a field with large hats, working the soil with hand tools. Neither of them looked up at him.

He looked around and went into the house. A middle aged, balding, black man was sitting at the kitchen table. In front of him was a chess board.

"Have a seat, Pat. My name is Elijah."

"Why am I here?"

"So we can have a friendly game of chess. It's your move."

"I don't. . ."

"I said 'move'. All people as smart as you plays chess. You do play, don't you?"

"Well, yea, I'm pretty good."

"Please." Elijah held his hand out toward the board.

Both men made a few moves. Elijah could feel that Pat was experiencing some tension. He wanted to see how Pat would act under at least a little pressure.

"Tell me. . . Pat? Patrick?"

"Either way." Patrick made another move.

"Tell me Pat, what are your dreams?"

"Umm. . .What?" He looked up from the board at Elijah.

"What do you want out of life? Everyone wants something."

"I wanted out of the OCA."

"Why?"

"That's my business. What is this anyhow?"

"What if I told you I was your friend?"

"You would have to prove it."

"How would I prove it."

"By doing something for me."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." Patrick looked back at the chessboard and contemplated his next move. "I just want to survive?"

"Why did you hate the OCA so much?"

"Why are you asking so many questions?"

"That's a fair enough question," Elijah said, "but I choose not to answer it. Why do you hate the OCA so much?"

"I don't really hate it, I guess. It was not really my idea to join you know, service is mandatory."

"The OCA took part of your life away."

"Yes. That is exactly right. I'll always hate them for that."

Elijah made a move, and was waiting for Patrick make a move. "So, you had something you gave up to be in the OCA."

"Yes."

Elijah turned and pulled out a piece of paper and a pencil out of a drawer and set it in front of Patrick. "Who was she?"

Patrick froze in place. Elijah could sense that Patrick's breathing paused a moment.

"Is any of this any of your business?" Patrick asked.

"Yes. Go on. Give me her name and address."

"Why?"

"Because we are friends."

"How do I know you won't hold her hostage?"

"For *what*? So I can have your backpack?"

Patrick stared at Elijah. Elijah didn't flinch. Patrick wrote on the paper.

Elijah looked at the paper. He shook his head. "You know, I'm trying to be serious here, right?"

"What?"

"Schmickle?"

"Schmickle is a real name."

"Yea, but 'Bella Schmickle' from Wapakoneta?"

"That's about like Joe Schmo from Kokomo."

"Hey, you can't make stuff like that up. Neil Armstrong was from Wapak, you know. It's a real town."

Elijah figured now would be a good time to change the subject. "Patrick, you are a spy here now. Don't say anything to anyone about it."

"I . . I . . I am?"

"I can say it again, if you like. Patrick, you are now a spy, working for Crawfordton."

Chapter 22

Ayanna left school. Mike was following her.

"I want to see if I can get a job at your farm," Mike said.

"They don't need anybody else."

"Sure they do."

"Sure they don't. You can't follow me."

"We're just talking."

"No we're not." Ayanna stopped. "You can't follow me anymore. Go home, Mike."

"Fine. I'm one of your best friends, you know."

"Okay. I'll see you at school tomorrow."

When Ayanna got to the Farm, she noticed something. . . someone was missing. The prop farmer was not outside faux farming. Hmm. . . Wonder where he went?

Ayanna went inside and found Elijah with the new guy.

"Where's the farmer?" Ayanna asked, almost making a game out of it.

"There's no farmer out there," Elijah said. Then he said, "Pat, this is Ayanna. She is an associate of mine. Ayanna, Pat is here to join our team. He says he is very good at chess. Please play him."

"Why do you want me to beat a girl in chess?" Patrick said.

"Oh, I don't. I want you to lose."

"What!? Why is that?"

"Because you are too arrogant. Not only is your arrogance a threat to your own safety, its rather distasteful."

Pat sat down in a huff. They started to play. Ayanna was content to trade pieces. They kept swapping casualties until neither one had very many left. Finally, Patrick put a checkmate on Ayanna with his two rooks. "I told you I would win."

Elijah said, "Yes you won, but look how many of your pieces you gave up."

Patrick said, "She is pretty good, for a girl."

Now let's go for some physical training. They went out to the shed. An old beat up United Nations straight truck was stashed out there, but there was still plenty of room for training.

Elijah squared off with Patrick in a casual stance. "Hit me, Pat."

"I can't hit you, Elijah. I'll kill you."

"Put me out of my misery. . .Patty."

"Oh no no. I hate that name. But you are just doing that."

"Come on, Patty cake, knock me on my ass if it is so easy."

"I don't want to."

"Do I have to make you want to hit me? Come on, Patty, this is just training."

"Okay then. You asked for it."

Patrick took a swing which Elijah easily deflected with a hard block.

"Ow! My arm!"

Then Pat tried to hit him with his other arm and it was blocked in the same manner. In frustration, Pat threw a few more easily read roundhouse punches that were blocked without using very much effort or creativity.

Elijah said. "Pat, you *might* be the best chess player here, but you are the worst fighter, for sure."

"What?! Are you saying I can't beat Ayanna? What did I ever do to you?!"

"Be my guest," Elijah said. "Full contact, Patty versus Ayanna, Go!"

"Fine!" Pat said.

He walked up to Ayanna with his arms forward as if to grab her. She used Elijah's hard block tactic on both arms at the same time then gave him a full-on punch in the gut.

"Ooof!" A rush of air came out of Patrick. He backed up to get his breath. In frustration, he attempted to kick her.

She pulled her elbow in to protect her side, then used the coiled arm to unleash a vicious punch to Patrick's wide open crotch. Patrick doubled down in reaction to the punch. Then Ayanna was poised to throw an uppercut to Patrick's vulnerable face with the other hand.

"Stop!" Elijah said. "Getting kind of personal there, Ayanna."

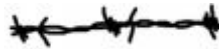
"I intend to win any fight, Elijah."

"Son of a . . ." Patrick could not get his breath. He was walking off the pain. "I'm starting to think you guys don't like me."

Elijah said, "We don't really know you that well, Pat. But I told you we are friends. Just be glad we are on the same team."

Patrick continued to walk off the ache. Doubling over occasionally. "She is good."

"You will be too," Elijah said. "We'll work on it every day. I expect you to be better than either one of us."



Phil saw Sophia outside dumping some water. "Sophia."

"Hi Phil. I hear you are not at the Academy anymore."

"Yea, that's right, I was asked to leave by Major Anderson."

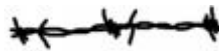
"What? That's terrible! I never did like the creepy little man much."

Phil said, "We worked together to build that Academy, but he didn't see fit to have me help run it."

Sophia shook her head in disgust.

Phil said, "They are going to get a new Commandant, so you can still continue to send the boys over there. If it doesn't work out, I'll keep my promise to you, and train them on whatever they need."

"Oh thank you so much, Phil. I can always count on you."



Every day Ayanna got home she was limping or showed signs of pain from bruises she got from fighting. Amy was getting upset that the Farm was working her so hard.

They were eating some soybean pancakes when Amy said, "Ayanna, what are you doing over there that they are killing you?"

"I'm working, Amy. Farm work is hard."

"Well you are working too hard. I'm going to go over there and find out what is going on."

"I'll take care of it," Phil said. No one is going to exploit any daughter of mine.

Ayanna snuck a quick glance at Phil as he overacted. She knew in spite of such big talk, he would do no such thing. It was nice that he called her "daughter" though.

Chapter 23

One Week Later

Every day the training continued. Ayanna was getting used to being with Patrick, although they had nothing in common.

Elijah called a staff meeting. Ethan sat at the kitchen table with Ayanna and Patrick. Also the phantom farmer was sitting there. The farmer had an unusual look about him. His face was as curious as his frumpy body.

Elijah said, " This is our associate, 'Mr. La Rata'. Rata has been gone on an important mission. My concern here is secrecy. We can't allow ourselves to become known by our enemies or it would mean certain disaster.

Elijah said, "I want to take a moment right now to better define what our roles are here. We are all in charge of taking care of, and defending the house, including a new member I am going to introduce in a few minutes. We are all field agents, meaning we go out to gather information. We are all analysts, meaning we take the information and determine what is the intent of our enemies. Any questions?"

They all looked at each other. Elijah nodded to La Rata, who got up and left the room. He came back a couple of minutes later with Bella Schmickle.

"Bella!" Patrick jumped out of his chair. "You're. . .You're here! I can't believe it!" Patrick ran over to embrace her.

Bella said, "Rata said I had to come here. You needed me desperately."

"What did you tell your sister?"

"I just left a note that I was leaving."

"So, you are going to stay?"

"Patrick, I want to be with you forever." He held her close. "Thank you, Elijah."

Rata said, "Hey! Hey! Hey! I went all the way over there and got her and brought her back. Show me some love here."

Patrick said, "Thank you Rata! You are the greatest."

Bella said, "Yes, thank you Rata. Sorry I gave you so much trouble."

"No problem."

Elijah said, "Patrick, will you stay here with all of your *friends*?"

"Yes sir. You are definitely our friends. We want to stay here, right, Bella?"

"Where else would we go?"

Elijah said, "Bella, your job is to keep house here."

"Okay. I'll do a good job."

"Bella, if you will excuse us, we have a meeting to conduct here. Please go outside whenever we have a meeting. Also, please never go into the shed."

"Okay." She had a look of disappointment in the restrictions and went outside.

Patrick asked, "Why can't she stay?"

"Because of that!" Elijah pointed at Patrick. "You will fight for her and she will fight for you. We aren't having that boyfriend/girlfriend drama here. Trust me, you won't want her in these meetings any more than I would want my wife here. That's the final word on that topic. Patrick, you are Rata's hired hand. He got out of the scavenging business and bought this farm in order to help us. He is a true patriot."

He looked at Ayanna, "Ayanna is part-time help here on the farm, and I am a visitor, Rata's friend. Rata may have some other friends coming here from time to time. Everyone got it?"

They all nodded in agreement.

Elijah said, "All right. We have some more business. Tomorrow night, everyone bring an extra set of black clothes. Let's keep them here. Anyway, one of the big concerns we have right now is the Hexmen. We don't know much about them."

Ayanna's ears perked up as it was her pet topic that was being discussed.

Elijah said, "A Hexman mob is not the kind of place we can infiltrate like Delburg or something like that. So what we need to do is capture one of them and bring them back here for interrogation. Our front person on this one has to be Rata. Ayanna, I don't want you anywhere near them since some of them have seen you already, and I'm pretty sure they don't like you. But I want you to help sniff them out with your hyperosmic senses."

"My what?!" Ayanna said. "I need to know what it is before I can use it."

"Yea, it seems that you have an abnormally acute sense of smell, at least for sniffing out some things, like filthy Hexmen. Tell your folks you will have to work late tomorrow night. You will not go anywhere beyond the point of finding their trail. Once

you're done, come here immediately and report, then go directly home. Right, *Arrow Girl?*"

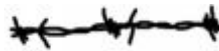
"Got it, but won't it take all week to figure out where they are?"

"Don't worry about that right now. We know the general area, but we didn't want to get too close and spook them off until we are ready."

"Okay."

"Rata will lure a Hexperson out of the camp and Patrick will help bring them back. Alive, please. Oh yea, one more thing." Elijah pulled out a Benjamin Franklin silver half-dollar for each of them at the table. Here's your two-week's pay."

Ayanna stared at the cash. Amazed that she was getting big money for having so much fun.



Ayanna had her bag of black clothes with her on the way to the Farm. "Dang it!" That freaking Mike Hendricks was always stalking her! If he used those skills that effectively at the Farm he would get hired in a heartbeat.

"Hi Angela. . .I mean, Ayanna."

"Hi, Mike. Hey, you know, I'm kind of busy right now. You don't mind, right?"

"You sure are busy a lot. Where are you going?"

"The same place I'm always going, Mike, to work."

"Did you ask if I could work there yet?"

"Oh, I forgot. I'll get back with you tomorrow on it. You better get away now, so I don't get fired."

"Why?"

"The boss says he doesn't want any of that boyfriend/girlfriend drama, you know. . .*not* that we are, you know. . .anything like that. Okay Mike, see 'ya around."

Mike had a bewildered look on his face. "Okay, See ya."

Ayanna arrived at the farmhouse. Rata and Patrick were already dressed in black.

Rata said, "Go in the bathroom and change."

After she came out, Elijah was sitting at the table. There were three pistols on the table with holsters. Here is one for each of you. Ayanna, you take the .22.

Ayanna recognized it from her practice. It was no trouble to carry or shoot.

"Okay team, report to the shed," Rata said.

They went out to the shed. Inside was Ethan Mentzer and three of the other Scouts mounted on their horses.

"Ever ride a horse before?" Ethan said to Ayanna.

She was speechless, she shook her head, bedazzled by his dashing cowboy image and his long blonde hair.

"Here, put your foot here, and I'll help you up."

She mounted the horse effortlessly with Ethan's help. Ethan was so strong. This was the coolest thing ever.

"Put your arms around me so you don't fall off."

Rata immediately gravitated toward the lone female rider. She gave him nominal help, and struggled to get on, and the horse did not like it, but the horse was well trained and only twitched and danced around some. Once on the horse, Rata snuggled up with his rider. She arched her back a little, trying to make Rata give her some space. Her wiggling only encouraged him.

Patrick also got on a horse with another rider without much trouble.

Elijah opened the large door and the horsemen went out northward up Harris Road.

Chapter 24

The scouts took the team toward Shanesville, then west down an Armistead County Road. They arrived at an abandoned house. Ayanna felt stiff and bow-legged after she dismounted the horse, but didn't want Ethan to see her struggling so awkwardly. The others were also not used to riding and suffered from the same effects.

Ethan told Ayanna, "You're kind of young to be involved in something like this, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Hey! Don't I know you?"

"Maybe."

Ethan waited for some kind of elaboration by Ayanna, but she didn't add anything. "Anyhow, a couple of farms out here got raided. Conventional wisdom says they are out in this area immediate area someplace. You people are on your own to do your thing from here."

"We'll be back, man," Rata said. "Thanks for the ride."

"We're not planning on going anywhere too soon," Ethan said.

The three were dressed in black, but it would not be dark for hours.

Ayanna was trying to mentally deal with the fact that she had some kind of special olfactory sense of smell. That would not be good for her troublesome reputation if the townsfolk started saying she had some kind of mutation on top of her other weirdness.

Rata asked Ayanna, "So how does this bloodhound thing work that you got?"

"I don't know if it is really real to begin with."

Rata said, "Well I hope it works, because we don't want to get caught off-guard."

Patrick said, "I don't like this. They may be watching us right now."

"Me either," Ayanna said, "The last time I did this was at night, and they were all over us."

Patrick said, "You've done this before?"

"Once. Yea. Maybe I got lucky. We found them. I think I could smell them."

Rata said, "They must be asleep."

"Why?" Patrick said.

"They gotta sleep sometime, right? They always cause their problems at night, don't they?"

"You know, that does make sense," Patrick said. "But they are still going to have a lookout. They won't forget the battle near Shanesville, where they used their flag of truce treachery on you."

"I see you know your history," Rata said.

The trio kept walking toward a woodlot that bordered the road. There were a lot of woodlots throughout the flat landscape. Most were cleared for farming, so they were in neat rectangular patterns, unless they came up against a bend in the road or a meandering waterway.

"We need to get into the woods so they can't see us," Rata said.

The woodlot was small, so they got through it in about ten minutes. They stopped to survey the area behind the woodlot.

They could see a half-dozen other woodlots. In order to get to any one of them they would have to cross open terrain. But at least this time of year the open terrain was covered with high grass.

Rata said, "I think we should check out that small woods over there."

"Why?" Ayanna said. "That is way too small to hold a big clan."

"Yea, but there is a lot of lamb's quarters growing out there on the way that we can eat for dinner. I wish that was growing close to home. Man, I love that stuff. Plus its free."

Ayanna said, "There is a creek that runs into that large woodlot over there. It looks like there is no road next to it." Ayanna continued to focus on the distant woods. The woodlot had its own water supply and was more secluded than most.

"Are you ready to go there?" Rata asked. "We can sneak up through the creek."

Ayanna continued to look intently at the woods. She had visions of her not so distant past. In her vision, she was looking up, and saw turkey buzzards. The vultures were circling around her, her clan and their meal; around the carrion that the buzzards thought they should have gotten. She watched the buzzards. They weren't just nesting there, they were lingering; waiting for their chance at some of the carrion. It was obvious to

her that there was some sort of cannibalistic clan in that woods. She didn't have to smell the Hexmen. It was too easy to figure it out.

"They may be over there. In that large woodlot," Ayanna said.

"You sure?" Patrick asked.

"No."

Rata said, "Okay. We start crawling out to that section of lamb's quarters, then we go left toward the creek, then we go up into the large woods. If we crawl, they won't see us."

The other two nodded in approval.

Rata said, "It's a lot of crawling around. I'll lead the way."

They crawled single file through the grass. Rata was cursing his way as he blazed a trail through the tall, frequently prickly weeds.

After about an hour of the crawling, Patrick asked, "Can't we just walk over there?"

Rata answered, "Not only no, but hell no. I ain't gonna end up being barbequed by some Halloween voodoo clowns from Hell."

"Keep going!" Ayanna emphatically whispered.

In a short time they were at the plot of lamb's quarters. They rested on their backs, looking at the sky, while stripping handfuls of the tender leaves and shoving the handfuls into their mouths.

Rata said, "Now all we need is some salad dressing."

Ayanna said, "Salad dressing? What's that?"

Rata said, "You take this mixture of. . .

"Shhhhhh!" Ayanna said.

Rata said, "Why the hell do you ask . . ."

"Shhhhhh!" Ayanna bumped Rata's ankle with her fist. She realized that maybe it *was* true. She *could* smell them. The passing smell was the only way she knew the Hexmen were close.

The three all froze in place. Rata moved around enough so he could raise up and get a peek above the top of the grass. Rata saw a small army clad in rags, spread out and carrying an assortment of weapons. They were walking from the large woodlot toward

the woods the trio had just snuck out of. The nearest of the clansmen were about thirty feet away. None of the Hexmen were walking toward their present position.

Patrick and Ayanna took a quick peek at the situation.

Ayanna worried that one of them might notice the trail that they had made through the grass. But the group of Hexmen was making plenty of paths on their own. She also worried that she was not going to be able to leave on her own after detecting the Hexmen, at least not now. She also realized that If Rata would not have seen the lamb's quarters, they would have been in the direct path of the Hexman advance.

Rata started crawling double time through the vegetation, continuing on their original path. The others followed. When they got up to the creek, Rata took a look at the barely moving, slimy algae covered stagnant creek water. He made a face. "Patrick, let's go. 'Yanna, find a safe way to get back to the horses, or home. Nothing is worth going into that damn swamp. Don't get caught. I'm serious."

"Okay," Ayanna said.

Rata stood up, then Patrick slowly stood up. They walked along side of the creek toward the large woods. Rata awkwardly moved as fast as possible. Patrick easily kept up. Rata kept looking at the Hexmen, hoping none of them would turn around. So far, so good. The Hexmen were all keenly focused on the woods they were approaching. Rata and Patrick made it into the cover of the large woods.

The pair walked around freely in the woods. There was no one around. They walked for a few minutes. Then suddenly Rata stopped. "Oh hell no!" He saw the human bone pile that the Hexmen had accumulated, at least since being in that location. It was apparent that the remains were still relatively fresh. The stench was horrible.

"Don't look!" Rata told Patrick, while he was getting sick.

"At what? Awww. . .Crap!"

Rata bent over and was coughing and spitting. Then dry heaving.

Patrick said, "You want to know something weird? There aren't any women around here. Where are their women?"

Rata thought about it. "Hey, you're right. Where are they?"

Patrick said, "Bloody Hell! God!" He saw several women's heads cast off into the undergrowth of trees.

Rata said, "Hey! What is this, their damn pantry?" Rata pointed out three people who were tied up and gagged. "And one of them is a Hexman. Looks like our job is

done here."

Patrick said, "Does this one count?"

Rata said, "Why not?" He started to cut another man and a woman free. "That Hexman obviously does not play well with his old pals. Maybe he has a good story to tell."

"Oh thank you!" the non-Hex man said holding Rata's arm. He was stretching his muscles and joints. "I thought we were goners, for sure."

Rata freed the woman. She was just laying there, disconnected from her surroundings.

"Come on, Beth!" the man said. "We gotta get out of here!"

The woman just moaned and groaned.

"Here," Patrick said, offering Beth a drink of water.

She took in some and started to breathe heavily. Then turned her head back to the container for more water. Rata and Patrick helped her up.

Rata cut the ropes that were holding the restrained Hexman's feet together. He left the gag in his mouth and his hands tied.

Patrick said, "They are coming back! I can see them through the trees! They are almost into the woods!"

Rata said, "Don't worry, let's go out of the woods the other way." Then he said to their captive Hexman, "Get up, damn it! You want to stay here and be the next thing on the menu?!"

Patrick said, "What about those people?!"

Rata said, "They're gonna die."

The captured Hexman saw that it was in his own self-interest to get away. So he was cooperating nicely. Rata found a fairly large diameter tree trunk that had fallen over the creek. He pushed the Hexman on it. "Move! Go!" The Hexman ran across the trunk with his hands behind his back. Rata made it over the trunk and so did Patrick.

Patrick looked back. The man was trying to help Beth on top of the tree trunk. She was disoriented and not gaining any ground. "Come on! Leave her!" Patrick yelled.

"No stupid! You run, damn it!" Rata screamed at Patrick.

Patrick ran behind Rata, who was slow to begin with. Patrick looked back once more. Beth was on the log with the man holding her up.

Zip. Zip. . .Zip. Arrows were going into the man's back

Patrick finally realized that the couple were a lost cause. he turned away and started running full speed. He went around Rata, and then the captive. In the distance he telephone poles running in a line, indicating that there was likely a road out there that could not be seen because of the tall grass. He went straight across the field toward it.

Rata was huffing and puffing behind the captive, but still kept going.

Gunshots were heard at their backs. This helped propel Rata, motivating him to dig deeper for more.

Patrick looked back. The Hexmen were swarming out of the large woodlot. It was clear they were not going to give up, no matter what. He stopped and took a couple of shots at the closest Hexmen who were at long range. The shots missed, but it gave Rata and the captive a chance to catch up.

The captive was struggling. He looked like he was in pretty good shape, but he was greatly fatigued from running such a distance with his hands behind his back. Then he lost his balance and fell over.

"Son of a bitch! Get the . . ." Rata needed oxygen and couldn't say any more, but he stopped to help the captive up, and they resumed running.

An arrow came flying between Rata and the prisoner. Rata turned and shot at the archer who was only twenty yards back. The shot went through the Hexman's arm, and he went down. Rata wanted to turn back and capture him also, but there was no time. The rest were still coming, but only a few good runners were closing in.

Finally they were getting close to the road. Patrick looked back. Rata was getting ready to shoot their captured Hexman in the head. That meant Rata was ready to give up.

Patrick said, "Hey! Come on you little Mexican wimp! You want to die like a dog out here? Get your sad brown ass in gear!"

"What?!" Rata pulled down the gun and with renewed resolve told the prisoner, "Let's go!"

Patrick risked his own life by stopping. He stayed there and shot at the Hexmen. He emptied his clip. He hit one of them and the rest stopped. Rata and their captive was now at long range.

Patrick waited for them to catch up. He yelled again, "Hurry up! There's a woods up the road!"

"AAAAGh!" Rata had to run some more. The captive was doing horribly. The prisoner could barely keep from doubling over in pain.

If they turned and ran up on the road, they could move a lot faster, but the Hexmen would be able to cut them off and catch up.

"No," Rata said. "We gotta run straight!"

It was another mile to the next woodlot, if they went straight.

Patrick said, "Okay, we'll lose them in the woods!"

"We can't. They'll surround the woods and get to us. There are too many of them."

"You'll never make it!"

Rata said, "That way!" pointing toward the same direction they had been running.

"Give me the prisoner!" Patrick helped him over the ditch next to the road then over the ditch on the other side of the road and they resumed running.

A few of the Hexmen had caught up during their conversation.

Patrick said, "I got plenty of ammo. Run."

Rata ran with the prisoner again.

Patrick hopped into the ditch for cover. He began to fire. Now the Hexmen were stopped dead in their tracks. They dropped to the ground for cover. Patrick shot a Hexman who tried to get into the ditch on the other side of the road. He knew he couldn't allow them to take cover in the opposite ditch, or he would be pinned down. The wounded Hexman fell into the ditch head first. Rata and the captive were soon at extra long firing range.

Patrick employed the tactic of dropping down and appearing in various positions to take a quick shot. There were a lot of Hexmen accumulating at far range. Some were starting to do a flanking maneuver, which could be Patrick's undoing if he stayed too long.

One of the Hexmen commanded, "Chaaarge!" They were coming in force. As one of his adversaries hopped into the ditch, Patrick hopped out.

The Hexman tracked Patrick directly in the back with the iron sights of his gun in short range and fired, but the slender young man ran behind a telephone pole and was

mostly covered behind it. The telephone pole was hit. . . and hit again.

Patrick was feeling in his training zone. He reached out from behind the telephone pole and touched the Hexman in the face. Then Patrick resumed running in a partial zigzag pattern, after Rata and their captive, who should have been a lot farther ahead, but at least caught some of their wind back.

Some of the Hexmen jumped into one ditch or the other and some ran past the ditches. In desperation, Patrick pointed his pistol behind his back while on the run and sprayed some random shots. This tactic caused all of them to pause. None of them wanted to be "that Hexman".

Patrick resumed zigzagging and was starting to get away again. He caught up to Rata and their prisoner.

The woods was about a "click", or about 1000 meters away. The Hexmen were about a half a click back. It seemed like the closer they got to their destination, the slower Rata became.

"Come on! Hoof it out!" Patrick said.

The trio was soon into the next woodlot. There was no sign of any humans.

"Crap!" Rata said. "I'm dying here."

"We gotta keep going," Patrick said, they're still coming.

"I don't know," Rata said, "maybe you better go on with the prisoner. I can stall them."

"No way. I need you. We're almost there."

"I might be jeopardizing the whole mission," Rata said. "Where the hell are we, anyhow?"

"I don't know. I thought you knew."

"Dude, I'm from Detroit, not from Hexhell damn voodoo land!"

"Let's go! We gotta move!" Patrick said.

The Hexman captive was wheezing.

Rata said, "Man, no lie, that dude is gonna keel."

"Then he keels! Come on!"

Rata pushed the Hexman to get running again. They went straight through the woods.

"Get going!" Patrick said to them as they were casually moving, "I'm gonna slow them down again for you. This time don't screw around!"

Patrick saw some of them start to flank the woods. But there were some coming into the woods. He couldn't stay there for long. He positioned himself behind a large tree and found an unsuspecting target slowing advancing trying not to make any noise. With a single shot he dropped the Hexman.

Patrick wanted to avoid drawing anyone to his location if possible, so he moved laterally to keep the Hexmen guessing.

BAM! Two-for-two. He moved again. He thought it prudent to try and catch up to Rata.

On the other side of the woods, they came to the back yards of a modern country housing development. The front of the houses were on another county road. It looked like all of the beautiful brick homes were abandoned. There was no reason to think anyone would be remain so close to the Hexmen.

"Hey!"

Patrick thought he heard something.

"Hey!"

He did hear something.

"Down here, dummy! Under the deck!"

A wood deck was at the back door of one of the houses. Rata held out a piece of cheap looking lattice work that he broken into under the side of the deck. "Quick!"

Patrick hustled to get under the deck. Rata set the lattice work back in its original position. It was dark and full of cobwebs under the deck but they had a panoramic view of everything that went on in the area, yet they could not be seen from the outside. It was a welcome place to recuperate.

Chapter 25

Crawfordton

The woman scout dropped Ayanna back at the Farm. Ayanna gave Elijah a cursory report of what she knew and changed her clothes, then hurried home. It was not much later than usual. Ayanna was home in time to have some rabbit stew.

Amy said, "You sure get into your work." She started going through her hair. "Where did you get all of these burrs in your hair?"

"The brush."

"Brush? Out on the farm?"

"If you go over there you won't see any now," Ayanna said.

"I hope they're paying you well," Amy said.

"I got a half-dollar today."

"A half dollar! That does sound like a lot. For working on the farm?"

"Well, it is for two weeks of work."

"That's it?" Amy asked. "What are you doing over there?"

Phil thought he had better help Ayanna out. He patted Amy on the rear, "If you want to make an easy half-dollar, Babe, I can work out a deal with you."

Amy blushed, and glanced at Ayanna. "Hush, Phil. No talking like that."

Ayanna was exhausted after that day. She went to bed early, but couldn't stop thinking about Patrick and Rata.



Patrick and Rata walked all night and all morning the next day with their prisoner, but they did not stop at the house, nor Shanesville. They went directly to the Farm.

Patrick took the Hexman out to the shed while Rata went into the house to get Elijah. Bella was doing some cleaning in the house.

Rata told Bella, "Hey, I like what you've done to the place. I can actually see out the windows."

"Thanks, Rata."

Elijah came down the stairs.

Rata told Elijah, "The package is in the shed."

"Very good! Did you have any trouble?"

"Yes."

"Anyway, I knew you would come through. Good work."

"It's what I do. Patrick was very helpful."

Rata said, "You know, Bella, that man of yours is a very good worker."

Bella said, "You guys worked way too late."

Rata said, "That's no lie. I'm planning on sleeping all day. Would you excuse us a minute, Bella. We've got business."

"Sure." She left the room."

Rata said, "This Hexman we got was already a prisoner of the Hexmen. I think they were going to have him for dinner."

"That's very interesting," Elijah said. "Anything else?"

"Not really."

Elijah said, "Go ahead then. Ayanna and I can take it from here."

"You can?"

"More than likely," Elijah said.

He went out into the shed. "Looks like we got a real live Hexman here." Elijah inspected the tattoo on the Hexman's face. "Tell ya what, Hexie, I'm going to go ahead and put this handcuff on one of your hands here and the other one to the steering wheel of this riding mower. Now, you can either sit down or stand up. You can even lay down on the floor. If you do anything to abuse your privileges, we will take privileges away, up and including. . . well, I'll let you use your own imagination. Do we understand each other?"

The prisoner nodded yes. He sat on the mower seat.

Elijah said, "Okay, I am going to remove the gag here so you can talk. In fact, I encourage it. If you scream, no one will hear you, except for me, and I don't want to

hear it. So if you scream, I will put the gag back on plus take away a privilege. Got it?"

The Hexman nodded in the affirmative.

"Patrick, we're good here. Go ahead and get some rest. You are done for the day. Thank you. Good work."

Patrick went inside.

Elijah looked at the Hexman. "What's your name?"

"Why should I tell you?"

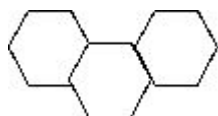
"Why wouldn't you? I don't really care what your name is. I can call you 'Garbage' if you want."

"John. . ."

"All right John, you got a last name?"

"Smith"

"That's very original, John. Tell me, what does the three hexes tattooed on your cheek mean?" The hex tattoos were interlocking on his face, like a bee hive.



John said, "You tell me. What do you think they mean."

"I think they identify you as part of a clan. I think the more hexes you have, the more prestige you have within the clan. Am I close, John?"

"Maybe."

"John, the only problem with this scenario is that you have 3 hexes on your face, an important Hexguy, but for some reason you are quite expendable. I hear you were only held in high esteem as the next meal. What's up with that?"

"Because I was quitting the Order. They won't let you quit."

"The 'Order'?" Elijah thought that sure was a high minded name for a bunch of cannibalistic murderers. We call you 'Hexmen', or just 'Hexpukes'."

"We don't go by Hexmen."

"So, you were quitting the Clan, huh? Why didn't you leave?"

"Where can I go? I got the Hex tattoos, you know."

"Yes. That could be a problem. For you to find a new meal ticket. We never told you to go get hex tattoos or join the Hexmen. This ain't like before, when cops had to prove everything, or you get to walk. You think you can go call a lawyer now, and he can get you off for some figment of a reason? I couldn't give a crap less about your freedom of expression, or any other excuses for not being responsible. As far as I am concerned, you have to prove you are trustworthy, otherwise, I have no real need to do anything other than leave you here forever. Got it?"

"You think you are a cop?"

"Let's just say you and I have a 'special relationship'."

"What do you want from me?!"

"I want to know everything about your little social club."

"You would never understand it. Besides, how do I know you won't shoot me when you are done with me."

"You don't, but how do you know I won't shoot you in the next minute? In fact, I might. If I were you, I'd start explaining why I shouldn't."

"I got friends! They will come here and find me and kill all of you! They don't like it when we are gone."

"Why do they want you back so bad? They hungry? You weren't quitting the Order, that is a lie. This is getting nowhere, I'll be back in a few hours."

"Okay, If I tell you something, will you listen?"

"I'll listen, but I may not agree or believe you."

"I am not part of the Order. I was trying to get out."

"Lie again."

"I was not part of *that* Order. As far as I am concerned, Patrick and Rata saved me. I have nothing to lose now. You will kill me, they will kill me. Somebody is going to kill me."

"Sounds like we just went in a big circle with this discussion. Explain."

"At first we did eat humans, but we didn't kill them. They were already dead. We don't believe there is anything wrong with it. Then they started killing the dying, then

the sick, then people who were not as useful."

"Like older people and children?"

"Yes. . . But all of us did not know this was going on!"

Elijah said, "Now ya'll go around openly killing people for food!"

"They do. Not me. I fought against it, then I was captured. That is why I became chosen for butchering. Not everyone agrees with the killing. That is why there are two main tribes."

"You mean there are more groups?"

"There are numerous tribes. Any marauder group not affiliated with the Order are attacked by the Order. Some tribes in the Order think it is okay to kill and butcher their own members and other don't. The tribe I was in declared war on another tribe who slowly killed off all of their own women and children. . .For food. I was captured so I was to be butchered."

"So, these groups are declining in population?"

"No. More people are getting accustomed to the idea of self-culling, and are joining."

Elijah said, "So you were just minding your own business, killing and eating people until someone captured you, harshing your mellow."

"You think you are better than us!?"

"I have better eating habits than you, so yes."

"We didn't have any food! People were dying!"

"And I really don't have a problem with that. The rest of us were out here working our butts off for a little bit of beans to eat. Remember that? Vegetables?"

"The quality of the non-essential personnel's life was horrible. They helped others go on."

You can't make this evil from Hell sound any better than what it really is, so don't even try. Let's talk about something else. Why the hex symbol?

"The Hexmen leader, Citizen One, was badly burned in a fire. When the building he was in collapsed, a resin hexplate walkway fell on him, leaving a permanent hex grid tattoo over the entire side of his face. A lot of people look up to Citizen One so they want to look like him."

"Where is this Citizen One?"

"Somewhere west of Shanesville. Maybe in Indiana."

"What would happen if he died?"

"I don't think very much. The tribes operate independently."

"What would it take to get rid of the Hex. . .The Order?"

"Put things back the way they were before the trouble. I know that is not going to happen, so we are here to stay."

"Yea, well things will never go back when there are those like you creating anarchy in the countryside."

Chapter 26

After the initial interrogation, Elijah went to the kitchen. Ayanna was there doing some schoolwork.

"Homework, huh?" Elijah asked rhetorically.

"Yea, I thought it might be good if I did some once in awhile. Amy has been getting on me about it. How's Mitchell Raymond doing?"

"Pretty well, he's a little small for his age though. At least that's what the Doctor says."

"That's good. I need to stop in and see him."

Elijah was looking around to make sure Bella didn't get any more information than necessary. "Listen. I think I got some information out of our guest. I want you to go in there and play 'good cop' now, see what you can find out. I pretty well got the 'bad cop' part covered without hardly trying."

"What's 'good cop'?"

"You know, be his friend. Have him tell you things he would only tell to his friend."

"Isn't that dishonest?"

"Why would it be? Do you hate the guy?"

"No. Not really."

"All right then. Even this kind of work is all part of war. Do you think you should go in there and say, 'Hey, never mind that I am a little girl, but I am super smart and want to know your secrets?'"

"Okay. Got it." Ayanna got up from the table and went over to the drawer and got the chessboard.

Elijah chuckled, "Where did you learn that?"

"It works."

Ayanna balanced the chessboard and all of the pieces out to the shed. The Hexman was there sitting on the seat of the riding mower with his head in his hands.

"Hi, John."

He didn't speak.

Ayanna set up the chessboard on top of the mower. She was leaning over the front of the mower while she set up the pieces. "You play chess?"

"A little. I'm not real good."

"I thought you might be a little bored. I'm just learning."

"Who are you anyway?" John asked.

"I work here. Go ahead and move."

Ayanna purposely left her rook open to capture, but the guy didn't see it. He must not be that sharp. She said, "Why are you here, locked up to the mower?"

"The older black guy thinks I am trouble."

"Really? I don't know why he would think that. You seem really nice to me. Did you do something?"

"No. I was captured, going to be killed. . .and eaten. Then they bring me here and I am locked up. Can you unlock me?"

"Sorry, I don't have a key." The chess play continued. Ayanna was waiting on John to move. "I'll be right back."

Ayanna knew that John was the enemy. But she also felt that thoughts of her own past was another enemy that she would have to overcome during the interview.

She came back with a glass of water for John and some squirrel jerky.

"Thank you. That is very nice," John said. He immediately started eating the treat, and washing the salt down with the water.

"Do you have any kids?"

"No. . .Not anymore." John made his chess move.

Ayanna looked at the move. It was too bad to ignore. She had to take his knight just in case he was testing her.

John said, "I had a wife, and two children. A gang came and killed them. I ran away." John hung his head in sorrow and shame.

"Sorry, John. Then what did you do?"

"I joined the Order."

"The Hexmen?"

"Yes. They promised to get revenge on the gang who killed my family. We killed every single one of them."

Ayanna thought this was going to be the key question in the whole discussion and had to handle it appropriately. "Wasn't you afraid to go fight with the Hexmen and kill that gang?"

"No. We had a lot more people on our side. We were also better fighters. They gave us all training. Once you were considered a trained warrior, you got your second tattoo. I got my third tattoo after the battle. Our Tribe was the good guys. We killed bad guys."

"Were the Hexmen nice to you?"

"We were like brothers, but after I got captured the Chief will think I am against him, and he will try to kill me."

"The Chief is not nice?"

"The Chief is always threatening to kill us if we don't do what he says."

"Maybe you could talk it over with them. You know, like in court or something."

"It doesn't work like that."

"If the Chief would let people go, would they leave?"

"I know I would have, and so would a lot of others."

"Ayanna said. "So what do you want to do now?"

"I don't know. I can't go back. They will get me. I guess I have to run away, far away. Can we play this another time? I'm pretty tired. I can't sleep well with my back on this mower deck."

Ayanna went back into the house. Elijah was in the living room laying on the couch.

"I think we need to let him go," Ayanna said.

"Let him go? If it was coming from someone else, I'd say that sounds plumb dumb."

"No. There isn't much more to know. I did find out if we take out the Tribal Chiefs a lot of the warriors will run off."

"Really?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Here's what you do. You found the key while I was taking a nap and let him go. But let's do it tomorrow, and I can have the boys follow him."

Chapter 27

The next morning Ayanna went into the radio room to say goodbye to Phil.

"Ayanna, would you mind taking this message over to Elijah?"

"K."

"You can look at it."

· The Ohio Confederation has expanded to now include almost all of free Ohio, after some new mergers with other groups. Rogue towns like Delburg were still pending further action.

· Anti-Axis Insurgents in the Toledo to Sandusky area were able to drive Axis forces back to Cleveland.

· Hawaii has been invaded by China. Sources suggest a battle was fought with the Hawaiian Navy, which Hawaii inherited from the United States.

· Dakota has formed an independent State. May seek union with Canada.

· Arizonans and New Mexicans are fighting back against the Chinese and their Latin American Allies.

Ayanna shrugged her shoulders.

Phil said, "None of that may seem like a big deal to you, but you have to look at the big picture and think about how little things can affect you in the future."

"Okay, Phil. I'll give him the message after school." Ayanna was just more concerned about whether or not Mike Hendricks would see her and follow her around again.

On the way to school she saw Mike Hendricks, who did not see her. Mike was walking with Tabatha Collins. Tabatha saw Ayanna. She leaned toward Mike's ear while looking at Ayanna and was saying something. Mike turned and looked at Ayanna and looked away. Tabatha started giggling.

Ayanna wanted to go over and confront her about being catty, but it would just end predictably with Tabatha denying it and Ayanna acting like she was interested in Mike.

Ayanna did a self-examination. Did she really like Mike? Well not in that way, but she did have to admit to herself that she liked being liked.

In school, Ayanna tried to stay as far away as possible from Mike and Tabatha, who were always together. Evidently Mike found a girl who liked to stalk as much as he did. Instead of being involved in petty drama, Ayanna preferred to focus on learning something that could end up making her life better in the future.

After school she went to the farm. She went into the farmhouse and found Elijah.

"It's all set," Elijah said. "Here's the key to the handcuffs." The boys are ready to go.

Ayanna took the key to the shed. John was sleeping in an unnatural position on the mower seat.

"John!" Ayanna said.

"Huh?"

"I got the key. I'm letting you go,"

"Oh, thank you."

She popped the lock. "Oh man, you don't know how much I appreciate this." He rubbed his red, irritated wrist.

"Go John! I'm going to be in a lot of trouble for this, and I won't get another chance!"

John the Hexman slipped out the door and started looking around. He came back in. "Which way is south?"

Ayanna had to think about where north was and then pointed south.

John went back out the door and started heading into Crawfordton.

Elijah, Rata, and Patrick were in the house looking out an upstairs window.

"He's going the wrong way," Patrick said.

Rata said, "Yea. I was just thinking that. Shouldn't he be going the other way?"

Elijah said, "You guys keep an eye on him. Make absolutely sure he does not see either of you."

John had almost disappeared out of sight after he went past Fort Wilcox.

"Okay. We're on it," Rata said.

Ayanna came into the house.

"Did he say where he was going?" Elijah asked.

"South," Ayanna said.

"It could be a trick," Elijah said.

Ayanna said, "I don't think so. He doesn't want anything to do with the Hexmen anymore. He is going to try and start his life over someplace else."

Elijah said, "So you think a lot of their members think the same way?"

Ayanna said, "I do."

Elijah said, "You guys follow him awhile and make sure he is not just doubling back to trick us. I don't want him giving the Hexmen intel about us. But if he continues south, just come back."

"All right," Rata said.

Patrick and Rata watched John from a distance. John wasn't stopping to talk to anyone. He went south down Harris Road.

They watched John from about a half mile away. Patrick told Rata, "Watch, he'll have to turn either east or west up here because of the Lake."

John turned east.

Rata said, "He's not going to Delburg."

"Nope. Let's watch him. If he goes past the next side road without turning north, he is not doubling back."

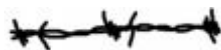
John went to the next side road and turned south.

Rata said, "For real man, he is going south. He is leaving the area. That's all we need to know."

"Good riddance," Patrick said.

"Hey man, anyone can change, you know."

"He can do his changing someplace else."



Phil Crawford was outside cutting some wood. He saw a man coming up the driveway. Two Guardsmen stopped the man. One of the Guardsmen went over to

Phil.

"Phil, the new Captain of the garrison is here to visit with you."

"Thank you. I'll go talk to him."

"Phil Crawford?"

"Yes."

"I'm Captain Frank Durand, the new commander of Fort Wilcox."

"Nice to meet you Captain."

"Likewise. I've heard so much about you."

"Really? From Major Anderson?"

"Oh yes, he made a point of making sure I knew how great you were."

"Good man, the Major."

"Umm. . . Yes he is." Durand looked down for a moment. Would it be possible for me to meet with the military leaders of the Community?"

"Of course. I am not the military leader, that would be Constable Jayden Phipps, but we are always ready. When?"

"I'd like to today, if that works for you."

"See you in an hour." Phil thought that this new OC Captain might be a break from the string of those he did not regard that highly. There was nothing too wrong with this guy; at least so far. He looked normal. He walked normal. He didn't seem overly political.

Phil rounded up Jayden and Elijah. He knew Ayanna would be hovering around somewhere snooping when she got home from school since Elijah was there.

Elijah encouraged Ayanna to stay closely involved with the business going on in the House, and Phil was aware of it. But Phil didn't really care. He was an open book.

Phil went to the door and let Capt. Durand in. He brought Durand to the dining room table. "This is Constable Phipps and Inspector Williams."

The men shook hands with Durand, and he took a seat.

Durand said, "I would like to request your help in a matter that has significance to this locality. Since the Axis has been set back on their heels for now, we would like to consolidate our control over the area. The reason being we would like to establish

petroleum trade with Texas, but our highway infrastructure is still not good. There are too many rogue clans here and there to make travel safe. I know Delburg is not really on a main thoroughfare, but it is just one more piece of the puzzle. So, what I am thinking, is that we can take the garrison and go to Delburg and oust the current regime."

Jayden said, "You want to go into Delburg and take on the Gofinns? How many of my men do you want?"

"I wasn't planning on using any. All I want is for you to man the Fort while we are gone."

Phil chuckled. But he was only laughing at the idea, not the Captain. In fact, the Captain was his sort of chap.

Durand glanced at Phil.

Jayden said, "You are going to need more help than that."

"What makes you say that?" Durand asked.

"Experience," Jayden said. "You are going to need some of the Guardsmen to help you, and that is with a very tight plan of action. You may want to call in some Shanesville Raiders. Elijah can supply you with a contact and intel."

"That would be great," Durand said, "We can provide the plan."

Jayden said, "Don't get me wrong. I would love to be rid of that horrible bunch over there. Trust me, don't take them lightly."

"I understand, Constable, we won't, from here on out."

Jayden said, "Elijah will take you over to the Farm, where you can design your strategy. I want to send one of my three platoons of Guardsmen. Another platoon and the HQ squad will watch the fort. We'll hold the third platoon on alert, in reserve."

"Thank you Constable, you have been extremely helpful. You are a true patriot to the Confederation."

Phil went out on the front porch. Ayanna went running by him, heading toward the Farm. He started laughing.

Elijah and Captain Durand found Ayanna sitting at the table.

"Hi young lady," the Captain said.

"Hi,"

"Can we use your table here?" Durand asked.

Elijah spoke up, "She's a military analyst."

Durand started laughing, "She's a what?! That's funny. No, we need. . . It was a joke. . .you. . .no way! Okay, fine; Little girl what is an APC?"

"An armored personnel carrier. There are two of them in your own Fort, a French built VAB and a heavier US M-RAP. I don't want to bore you with the details. I'm not a know-it-all."

"Hmmm. . .What is a RPG?"

"Rocket propelled grenade. I could tell you more, but it's a military secret."

"Are you kidding me?" Durand said. "What round does a AR-15 shoot?"

"A .223 caliber, and all of ours can also shoot a 5.56 millimeter."

"Who was Barbie's boyfriend?"

"Barbie who?"

"Okay, I got you now; What size mortar did the UN use against you in the Battle of Crawfordton."

"81 millimeter. And we kicked serious ass with nothing compared to what they had." Ayanna counter-quizzed, "Who wrote *The Prince*?"

"Umm. . .Machiavelli?"

"Yep. You're definitely good," Ayanna said.

"Okay, I asked for that one," Durand said. "But can you keep a secret?"

"I'll vouch for that one," Elijah said. "She knows all sorts of things that she 'doesn't know'. Likewise, please don't brag to anyone about our little prodigy here."

"Of course," He shook hands with Ayanna. "I look forward to working with you.

"Me too," She smiled.

Durand said, "You know, I can't help it, but you just look so young, and I feel bad for saying it; a girl."

"Don't worry about it. . . And yea, Barbie's boyfriend was Ken."

Elijah and Frank Durand cracked up over that one.

They got together and made their plans. Ayanna did not really have any problem with what Durand had to say, in fact, she found it enlightening.

The calculations involved in planning the scenario were highly detailed. They even set up a wargame map to theorize and make adjustments.

Ayanna thought that Durand was undervaluing Platoon-B, led by Angel Howard, but she did not want to say anything that would commit Platoon-B to a more dangerous involvement in the raid.

Chapter 28

One Week Later

It turned out to be one of the hottest days during the summer. School was cancelled on the day of the Delburg invasion. The rally bell intentionally did not ring. Everything was low-key.

Platoon-D, and the HQ squad took their place in the Fort. Lieutenant Murphy saluted Captain Durand as they changed the guard.

The entire Company of Ohio Coalition troops assembled with the Crawfordton Guard, Platoon-B, and a Platoon from Shanesville.

Ethan Mentzer and his scouts were also among them. The scouts were very interested in liberating Delburg from the tyrannical Gofinns since Delburg was the Scouts' hometown. They felt this may be their defining moment. They wanted desperately to rid Delburg of the Gofinns, and the Scouts never knew when they might lose their horses. Once the horses were gone, their ability to command and control would be severely limited. Seeing horses in this part of the country was a rarity.

Guard Platoon-A was to stay in the basement of the House and rest. Sleep, if possible. They would be called upon if needed.

But Ella was part of Platoon-A. Ella was outside. She and Amy were out to inspect the troops; especially Ethan Mentzer. Ella nudged Amy who looked back at her. Ella moved her eyes to Amy's other side to signal to her that Ayanna was there. Ayanna was standing there enjoying the formation as well. They both started snickering and went back to their ogling.

Ayanna thought the silly women would be *so* jealous if they knew she got to ride with Ethan on his horse. It was true that Ayanna, even as young as she was, thought Ethan was a beautiful man, but that was not her focus. As she looked around at the many souls, she thought to herself, how many of these people would even be alive five years from now? Ten years? Twenty years? She was a lot younger than almost everyone there. Would she live most of her life without any of them? Who would be in her life?

Ayanna was moved emotionally to snuggle next to Phil the way she used to. "Phil, are you happy with your life. . .The way it turned out?"

"You know you are a funny girl."

"Well?"

"I've made a lot of mistakes, I guess, but if I had it all to live over again, knowing what I know now, I would probably steer clear of those mistakes, but I'm sure I would make a whole bunch of different ones. But I have to say, I have the best wife a man would want, Jesus saved my soul from my sin, and gave me a great place to live and good health, I have great friends, and also I have you. You make my life better, dear one." Phil held her close to his side.

"Phil, you are the coolest guy I have ever seen."

"Sounds like you need some glasses."

Jayden exhorted his best platoon to function with honor, but be safe. He asked Angel to offer a prayer for the operation and the soldiers and bystanders participated.

When it was almost completely dark the combined force marched to a wooded area near Delburg. They were to wait there until night. The plan was to meet Crawfordton agent, Rocky Smillen and raid the Gofinn Headquarters with the best squad, simply called 'Elite 1'. Once all hell broke loose the rest of the forces would quickly subdue confused elements without the benefit of their leadership.

The Coalition leadership believed through Rocky's reports, that the Gofinns did not have the benefit of much in the way of heavy weapons.

The Coalition did have a couple of heavier machine guns, which were normally at the Fort, but were to be used in the operation.

The force took their places as planned. Captain Durand had not gotten any word of any breach in secrecy, but the potential certainly existed for it. There were a lot of military assets moving all over the place with a lot of citizens intermingling with them. For that reason, the overall plan was not given out prior to its execution.

It was as dark out as it was going to get.

Durand ordered, "Elite 1, execute."

A half dozen men with firearms and bows were clad in black with blackface moved toward the edge of town where Rocky's house was. Everyone else was to stay in the woods.

Rocky Smillen led the way to the Gofinns Headquarters. The route was dark and went through a residential area. Delburg inhabitants were used to staying inside at night. Rocky knew there was a strict curfew so there would be very little if any third party meddling.

The team arrived at the commercial section where the Headquarters was.

The headquarters was on a street corner. The front door was heavily guarded. There were bonfires burning on the street around the front and side of the Police station. There were two guards standing duty outside in their field of view.

The team was looking at the side of the building and the back door. The Commando Lieutenant motioned for two men to go out and around and come up a back alley to the back door of the building.

After a couple of minutes, the time was ripe. The Lieutenant motioned for the archery assault. They fired. The first guard took an arrow in the upper chest and went down without a peep. The second guard was also hit at a relatively short range and went down. He was making some noise. One of the back alley Commandoes ran up and slit his windpipe before anyone else was alerted, including the guards on the front of the building.

Now the team had an open path to the back door of the Headquarters. Everyone gathered at the steps of the back door and prepared to rush in.

Weapons at the ready, Elite 1 walked up the steps in an orderly method. They walked past some jail cells full of people and saw several unsuspecting Gofinns. All of the Gofinns had a Commando pointing a rifle at or near them. None of them spoke. The Commando Lieutenant and Rocky Smillen went up to the front door, then charged out and started firing at the guards who were looking in the other direction. At the same time all of the Gofinns inside the Headquarters were shot.

The commandoes checked all of the rooms in the building. They found no one. The building was secured. Now it was time to try and hold on to their prize. . .

Immediately gunfire erupted from all quarters upon the concrete-block building. Bullets were making their way inside. Elite 1 was only returning enough fire to suppress until help came.

Captain Durand ordered the rest of the force to invade. Everyone was to proceed toward the center of town and try to hammer Gofinns against the Elite 1 anvil.

Gofinns tried an unimaginative assault into the back door of the Headquarters, but were slaughtered before they could enter one step inside.

One Gofinn found a ladder and several got into the upper floor of the building. One of the Commandoes heard footsteps on the wooden upper floor of the old building and was waiting at the bottom of the stairs for them. The first Gofinn trying to sneak down the stairs was blasted and came tumbling down. The others backed away from the top of the stairway and were trying to return fire. Another Commando shot back at them

through the ceiling and the second story floor. Then the Commandos heard survivors going back to the ladder.

Many of the Gofinns in the perimeter areas of Delburg had left their post to try and retake their Headquarters in the center of town. They had mixed notions about what to do since they were not getting any orders.

About the time the Gofinns thought the attack was a limited one. They were being shot at from an endless number of angles. The attack was taking its toll on the Gofinns. The Gofinns were forced to take the defensive, and the battle soon evolved into a city fight. This was not something that was going to be resolved in the next few hours.

Gofinns could not just rush into any house and expect safe quarter. The citizens of the town hated them and would put a knife into their back if possible, since almost all of them had no gun.

Almost all of the pressure was taken off of the Commandoes at the Headquarters. At least for now.

Chapter 29

Crawfordton

Since everyone was on precautionary high alert in Crawfordton, Patrick and Elijah took the opportunity to do some of their real farming. The beans at the Farm needed a lot of weeding. So they went into the shed and grabbed their hoes. Then they started doing the tedious physical job on the large planted area.

"This sucks," Patrick said.

"Who you tellin'? I do this all the time, so welcome to my damn world," Rata said. "Elijah just sits in the kitchen and plays chess and talks. Otherwise, his ass is on the couch."

"No! No! Look!" Patrick said.

Rata looked up. A large group of Hexmen was seen a klick to the north. "Aw, hell no! Here we go again! There must be a hundred of them! Get Bella and run to the Fort. I'll go tell Elijah at the House."

Rata ran to the Crawford's House and burst in uninvited. Phil came around the corner and into the doorway with his pistol pointing at Rata. "You know you really ought to. . ."

"They're coming!" Rata said, pointing and trying to catch his breath, "from the north!"

Hearing the commotion, Elijah and Jayden came into the room. then Amy and Ayanna followed. Ella and Lieutenant Kowalski came upstairs to see what was going on.

Phil told Jayden, "Gofinns are invading from the north."

"No! Rata said, "Hexmen!"

"What?!" Jayden said. He put his hands on the side of his head in a display of desperation. "Okay, okay, uh. . .Kowalski, go out back and ring the rally bell. Ella! Go downstairs and tell your Platoon to get outside in the front trench, then bring your sniper rifle up here. Everyone else take up arms! Hurry!"

Lt. Kowalski was walking to the back yard to the rally bell, when he noticed something in the woods behind the house. The reflection of a rifle scope. It was not their own guard. Then he saw another figure move. Kowalski kept moving as if he had

not seen anything. He could be shot at any second. He walked in a wide angle to diminish suspicion and took a pee. . .

"Where's that bell?" Jayden said. He looked out the window, "What the . . .Dammit!" He tapped on the window.

Kowalski waved at Jayden like he was acknowledging a request to come back into the house. Kowalski entered the house. "Everyone away from the windows. They're also in the woods out back."

Jayden said, "Pass the word. Everyone away from the windows. Get quiet."

Elijah told Rata, "It's that John Smith, isn't it?"

Rata said, "No, I don't think so. Maybe the Hexmen just wanted him back. I guess it depends on which group it is."

Elijah said, well, anyway we don't have him here to use as a bargaining chip.

Ella came upstairs with her sniper rifle.

Ayanna stood there in a daze. Phil was there to comfort her.

Ayanna's mind was pulling her in a stream of thought. Don't give up; Art of War; God With Us; Soldiers are our Children; Then she pictured those in the house fighting against the Hexmen. The house was being ventilated by gunfire. In her mind's scenario, Phil was killed, Amy killed, all were killed, she was killed. It was over. They finally lost. Evil had won, then had them for dinner.

"You okay?" Phil asked.

"Ella has big boobs," Ayanna said.

"What?" Ella said, looking at Amy.

"She's delirious," Amy said.

"No! Ella has big boobs!"

"What?" Amy said, Hush now Ayanna. Go downstairs now where it's safe.

Ayanna said, "All warfare is deception, Ella has big boobs."

Elijah asked, "What the hell, Ayanna?"

Ayanna said, "All men here, who don't like to look at Ella's boobs, please raise your hands."

Amy looked at Phil.

Phil said, "Ayanna, what are you talking about? This is the worst time to talk about this!"

Ayanna said, "I know my enemy. You want to win, or not?"

Ella handed her sniper rifle to Amy and said, "I know what she's talking about. It's time for me to use my best weapon. . .s."

"Huh?" Jayden asked. "No! This is stupid!"

"What have we got to lose? I'll be back," Ella said. She opened the back door.

"Ella!" Jayden said, but it was too late. Jayden was preparing to follow her out the door.

"Don't do it, Jayden," Ayanna said. "She knows what she is doing. Trust her."

"This is messed up," Jayden said. Jayden went and looked out the back window. "She's getting a bucket of water out of the cistern! She's gone crazy! She's going over to the garden. I can't see her! Damn it! "

Everyone went upstairs so they could get a glimpse of what Ella was doing outside. Ella went into the gardening shed and brought out a hoe. She started working the soil vigorously. she took a break to wipe the sweat from her brow. In doing so, struck an interesting pose with her voluptuous figure for the benefit of her hidden audience. She worked awhile longer, still very very hot, and she "needed" to cool down further. She pulled down her jeans and kicked them off revealing some high cut panties.

"Jayden, my man!" Elijah said.

Amy said, "Phil you go downstairs!"

Phil turned and said, "Yea, whole thing ain't real good on my blood pressure."

Rata said, "Holy crap, man! That bitch is hot."

Elijah said, "That's the Colonel's wife dumb-dumb."

"Sorry Colonel. Damn, you're lucky!" Rata kept staring out the window.

Jayden said, "You know, this could work."

Elijah said, "Hell yes it will work."

Jayden said, "Kowalski, take your men from the front, and go flank these guys."

Ella was playing as if she was very concerned with hyperthermia after hoeing the garden, displaying herself from different vantage points as she worked and wiped the

sweat. It was just too hot out for such physical activity. It was time for the bucket. She held the bucket over her head with both hands and let the water pour out over her form. As the water flowed over her, all of her thin undergarments became soaked and transparent.

"Oh!. . .my!. . .God!" Amy said, looking out the upstairs window.

"Indeed," Elijah said.

Rata was standing back with his jaw dropped open.

"Nice work," Jayden said under his breath.

Ayanna rolled her eyes and shook her head, then went downstairs so she could watch the Platoon in action.

Kowalski gave Platoon-A the plan.

Sergeant Yamakawa said, "You say just run around and flank them, huh? Like that will work."

"Oh, it will work."

"It's suicide! I can't take my men. . ."

"I'll take point," the Lieutenant said

"Where's Ella?"

"She's in position. Now let's go!" The Lieutenant led the way the long way around the house.

Sergeant Yamakawa was used to Ella being deployed separately since she was the best sniper in the Guard. "Okay! On the Lieutenant!"

Private Preston Martin could see to his side in the distance what was going on in the garden. He almost ran into a tree when he saw his friend cavorting around, being all lively and uninhibited.

Ella heard a clatter in the distance. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the Platoon doing the flanking maneuver. She was seriously worried that her little ploy was not enough to distract the enemy, considering the noise they were making. Were they always that noisy when they moved? But the enemy better not see them this time, or she would be the first one to get it, then them.

Oh well . . .She whipped off her top and started hoeing bare breasted. Please, not the panties, she thought. Not that they were covering anything at this point. Unarmed;

undressed; knowingly alone in front of an armed hostile enemy; she couldn't had ever been more vulnerable. But she had faith in herself, and her amenities which had been the subject of constant scrutiny her entire life.

Jayden saw Ella take the step of removing her shirt and knew the situation was serious. "Everyone take cover!"

Each thrust of the hoe into the soil sent constituent parts of Ella's voluptuous form in motion. Each stroke of Ella's hoe impacting the ground sent the enemy deeper into an erotic trance.

Platoon-A shot the Hexmen in the back rows first. The enemy wrongly assumed the gunfire was friendly when it started. Once they tried to gather their wits, it was too late for them.

Ella dropped to the ground when the shooting started.

Within a seconds, an entire group of two dozen Hexmen had been slaughtered mercilessly by the Platoon. Only one Hexman managed to fire a desperate return shot because he was not seen. The shot missed, then he was pulverize simultaneously from multiple Guardsmen.

Jayden looked out the window after the shooting had stopped and saw Ella on the ground. "Oh no!" He stared at her a few seconds, then she got up, holding her T-shirt over her chest.

Before she could grab her clothes and run to the gardening shed, the rest of the Platoon passed by the garden on their way to reinforce the Fort.

Ella was subjected to all sorts of catcalls and remarks from her fellow soldiers. Morale had never been higher. Even Lt. Kowalski saluted Ella and winked.

Jayden went out in the backyard to check on Ella. They hugged. Jayden told Ella he was amazed at her nerve. "Never do that again! I'd pin a medal on you, but. . .you know."

"I gotta run," Ella said, looking around.

Then Jayden went to survey the scene. Phil's nephew, Wesley Crawford, who was supposed to be on guard there, took an arrow into the neck. He went back in to report it to Phil. But Phil, Elijah, Rata, and Ayanna were behind Elijah and saw Wesley.

Phil sighed. "He probably fell asleep one too many times. I tried to tell him he was going to get us all killed. Damn! Come on, Ayanna, let's go pick up some guns."

Ayanna said, "I should have been out here. I can smell them." She got up close and sniffed them, then their belongings. "Ugh! That's terrible! You guys can't smell that?"

"Not a bit," Rata said. "I can only smell money, when it's around."

Before the main force of the Hexmen could advance into town, they were met by a crossfire from both Platoons A and D and retreated. The action of Platoon-A was the key factor in the decisive victory.

Elijah told Ayanna and Rata, "Something was wrong here. If it wasn't John Smith, then how did the Hexmen know we had weakened defense right now. Maybe they are in alliance with the Gofinns or maybe we need to figure out how to carry out counter-espionage. This could have ended a lot worse today."

Chapter 30

Delburg

The Gofinns were only in secluded pockets. Captain Durand's Company was consolidating more and more of the town within their control. Citizens were coming out asking if they could help. Whenever an enemy weapons was captured, there were three Delburg inhabitants ready to use it on the Gofinns. Victory was only a matter of time.

Durand used Logan "Angel" Howard's Platoon to help set up an impromptu indigenous self defense force. The Delburg defense force hated the Gofinns with a passion after the way they were treated. So the Delburgians were at least emotionally ready for a fight with the Gofinns

Word got to Angel that a fresh batch of Gofinns from the Indiana Main Headquarters was heading toward the Delburg HQ. The Gofinn reinforcement group had at least two "technicals", a name given to a vehicle, usually a truck with a machine gun custom mounted on it. Then there were dozens of other troops with the technicals.

Angel had his own Platoon-B and about 20 field recruits who wanted some Gofinns to shoot at. Guardsmen Platoon-B was in the main commercial hub of Delburg, only a few buildings from the Commandoes. The tallest buildings were 3 stories high. He put all of the Delburg natives in one of the buildings. He used his own people to primarily protect the entrances of the building, and secondarily look for Gofinn targets.

As expected, the Gofinns moved ever closer. The technicals went slow enough so they did not get ahead of their foot soldiers.

The front technical had a mounted medium machinegun and was full of armed riders. As they pulled up, some of the Delburg Irregulars started firing. They fired way too soon for Angel's liking. Consequently, the technical only took a couple of casualties. The riders jumped out and took cover behind some cars on the opposite side of the street.

The second technical was manned with a heavy machinegun and was also full of riders, who bailed out when the shooting started. The heavy machinegun opened fire on the building, shooting at every window. The Delburg fighters took several casualties before the much more disciplined Crawfordton Guard started hitting easy targets.

The first technical's main gunner was hit and then the Ford S-10 caught on fire. Seeing this, the second technical started backing up as it was firing. The large number of Gofinn foot soldiers moved into closer positions.

Hearing all the action, the Elite 1 Commandos moved into the area, then some of the OC troops started moving into the pitched battle. Also some of the Shanesville Raiders contributed, who were alongside the dismounted Scouts. Any Gofinn movements anywhere in town were soon met with superior numbers.

The Delburg liberators were taking casualties, but the Gofinns were taking more. They underestimated the size and will of the OC Coalition and lacked a plan other than marching up the gauntlet of a lead firestorm.

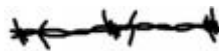
The turning point seemed to be when the first technical's gas tank exploded. The Gofinns showed their morale under the withering fire and started pulling back in an organized retreat. Some of the Gofinns who were previously pinned down saw this as their chance to escape the situation and ran toward the retreating reinforcements.

As the Gofinns took casualties and pulled back, many of their weapons were captured by unarmed citizens. They risked their lives to be able to put the hurt on their overlords. They had three years of pent up hatred of the regime's tyrannical abuse of power.

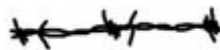
As the Gofinns pulled out of town, the retreat became increasingly hasty. Soon they were on the run. Delburg had finally been liberated after previous attempts had failed.

But the liberated population did not have satisfaction. They chased the Gofinns all the way to the Indiana border, where they originally came from.

The Ohio Confederation did not authorize its military to cross any historical borders. Even when they were fighting the Axis, they stayed within Ohio. This was a view not shared by all, but was more likely a reflection of the limited strength of the Ohio Coalition Army.



The next day, in Crawfordton, Wesley Crawford was laid to rest, along with a couple a couple of the Platoon-B Guardsmen. There were several Guardsmen from various platoons who had received injuries in the two battles. As long as no infection set in while they recuperated in the clinic, they would be fine. There was not much they could do for such patients during those times compared to before the trouble.



Later that week, Rata noticed that the crops they had worked on around the house were being destroyed. Patrick and Elijah had no idea what was going on, so they went to ask Phil.

Phil and Ayanna over to the Farm after school. "Lookey here," Phil said, pointing to the ground.

Elijah said, "Some kind of track. Hoofed animal. So that's a deer?"

"Yep," Phil said, "that's what it is. Looks like a heavy one. Sunk real deep."

"Oh man!" Rata said. "Fresh meat! Let's go look for it now!"

"You mean 'hunt'?" Patrick laughed.

Rata said, "Seriously. What's the difference?"

Phil said, "Let me go home and get my 'looking' rifle."

Elijah said, "Sounds great. Let's go."

On the way back to the House, Phil asked Ayanna, "You going with us?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Why don't you know?"

"I'm a vegetarian. . .kinda."

Phil thought about it. "Yea, I guess you are. . .kinda. You only eat the broth, not actual meat. We just never had that much meat around for me to realize it. Why don't you come with us anyhow, it will be fun."

"Killing, for fun?"

"Okay. Why don't you come along and help feed your family?"

"Okay, but I want a rifle that can do the job, not some girly kid gun."

"Fine. I can help you out with that."

They got to the house and Phil gave Ayanna a vintage German Mauser. "This thing will kick so don't put your face on it." It had a bayonet with it, but Phil took it off.

Phil asked Jayden if he wanted to participate, he was excited about the prospect, but then Jayden said he couldn't because of security.

Ayanna found that lugging the heavy bolt-action rifle was a chore. She started to question why she was involved again, but participating was for Phil.

The hunters all returned to the scene of the crime. Elijah said, "I tracked the deer. It came from, and went back to that nearest woodlot." Elijah remembered the area in

the Battle of Dan's Hill, which the Fortress was now built upon. It seemed so long ago now. Maybe it was just because so much had happened since those days.

"Good work, Elijah," Phil said. "This is like your typical Hexmen hunting tactics, except there are only a few of us, and the target cannot shoot back. If you three will go on the other side and flush the deer out, we'll take the shot. We just have to make sure we don't shoot any of our own."

So Elijah, Patrick, and Rata went around to the other side of the small woodlot with their weapons while Phil and Ayanna got into position.

"This is boring," Ayanna said.

"It can be," Phil said, "but you have to think of the glory of getting the kill."

Ayanna made a face of disbelief."

"You think you can hit a deer with that thing?"

"Maybe."

They waited quite awhile. Ayanna was thinking back on her trip to hunt Hexmen. She remembered the smell . . ."Phil!"

"What?!"

"Phil! I smell Hexmen!"

"What?!" Phil said, wondering what to do. "Do we need to get outta here?"

"I think so. . .Hey! Look!"

Phil saw a massive overgrown feral hog come charging out of the woodlot.

"It's coming right at us!" Ayanna said.

"Breathe. Take a shot," Phil said.

The hog came charging in a straight line.

"Is it gonna attack?" Ayanna said.

"Just hit it."

The big pig was getting uncomfortably close.

BAM! It was a hit with the high powered round. But the hog kept charging, almost as if nothing had happened to it. Ayanna dropped her rifle and started running.

POW! POW! POW! Phil finished the job with his semi-automatic AR-15, thought by gun banners not to be useful as a hunting rifle.

Ayanna turned back and was breathing hard. She was ready to cry. "I turned and ran. I should have re-chambered another round. an put it into its skull."

Phil said, "Not many have that kind of nerve, darlin'. That's why I like the AR-15. I can miss and shoot again right away. Nice shot, by the way. It would have died from that wound later anyhow. So you get the kill. Good job."

A tear ran down her face. "That was really intense." She went over to the dead animal and was smelling it. "It does smell a lot like the Hexmen. I won't forget the difference though."

Phil chuckled. "Yep, lots of boredom and a short period of intensity."

The other three came out of the woods.

"Hell! Yes!" Rata said.

Patrick said, "Woooo! Ayanna! Bringin' home the damn bacon!"

Elijah said, "We gonna party tonight!"

They set up a barbeque pit that night and roasted the massive animal. It took a gang of men to lift up the pig onto the custom made spit. There was enough pork on the 600 pound monster to give a portion to anyone who wandered by the House. The lard was saved. The nasty pigskin was saved.

Everyone loved the meat. Even Ayanna ate a bit and had to admit it was tasty.

"Hey Phil," Rata said.

"What?"

"There's something wrong with this meat."

"Not from where I'm sitting. I'm liking this real well."

"Yea. . . but this deer meat tastes just like pork. What's up with that?"

Those who knew the story started laughing. Ayanna laughed a laugh that she would remember forever. Just the idea of Phil being wrong about something like that was a hoot.

Phil made it even more funny by playing the victim and trying to recover saying deer meat was "venison" and that the tracks look the same.

Elijah said, "I'm just a black guy from Detroit. It looks like a deer to me."

They started busting their guts laughing again. Then everyone had to come up with some kind of quip for Phil or themselves.

Ayanna said, "You can't pick on Phil too much, before this hog came out of the woods, I thought it smelled like a Hexman."

They stopped chewing and looked seriously at each other, then the subdued snorts and chuckles turned into guffaws of laughter again. They all looked at Ayanna in the eyes with approval.

Ayanna had never felt more accepted into the Community. Telling jokes on oneself was a good way to build empathy with people. That fact was not in the Bible, or Art of War, or any other book. It was just something a person had to find out on their own.

Amy looked at Ella. "Do you understand any of this?"

Ella had her mouth full of pork. She shook her head and clearly didn't care.

Chapter 31

October

Overall, the harvest this year was a lot better than the previous year. A couple of the local farmers were trying to buy up Texas gasoline for use in the following spring. If any of them succeeded, they would be able to produce multiple times more food, and become comparatively rich in the process.

Ethan Mentzer and his Scouts had become leaders in Delburg. Delburg was accepted into the Confederation and Mentzer was named the Constable. The new leadership brought economic freedom to the town.

But this new arrangement was not without its pains. The town had been used as slave labor. Some had been taken to Indiana to work in the Gofinn foundry. The slaves were supplemented by a token amount of canned good. This canned food supply was now cut off. Also, Mentzer had to deal with prosecution of some inhabitants who were the worst collaborators with the Gofinns. These atrocities were so blatant, they blurred the line between collaborator and Gofinn. Some people were executed by firing squad.

The Academy at Fort Wilcox had not yet technically produced any graduates, but the OC had pressed a couple of them into service early as they sought to build up the ranks of the Army.

Mitchell Raymond was growing, but not very fast.

All in all, things seemed to be going well in Ayanna's world. She had saved all of her money she earned as a spy. She was starting to accumulate quite a sum. Being extra hungry one day, she thought she would go over to Burkett's market and see if there was something special she could buy for the family's dinner table. Ayanna didn't spend much, but a little couldn't hurt.

She was looking at what was available. There was this faint. . . yet certain smell. No, she was not going to cause trouble by thinking she smelled Hexmen again. The smell came, then it went. It did it a couple of more times. But why would she be smelling it in the market.

Nothing in the baskets really grabbed her much. Maybe she would take a look in the counter at the more expensive stuff. Amy would be happy if she brought something nice home.

There was a young man in front of her at the counter buying some apples, eggs, and about a hundred rounds of assorted ammunition cartridges. He pulled out a handful of

silver coins, which amounted to a lot of money. Whoa! The coat had the *Hexman-ish* smell as much as anything she had smelled.

Ayanna tried to get a good look at his face when he turned after completing the transaction. She knew she looked awkward when the mean looking guy looked at her. He didn't have any hex tattoos. Everyone pretty well knew to shoot anyone with a hex tattoo on sight anyways.

"I'll take a box of .223," she said to Mrs. Burkett. Wanting to make a quick purchase that was certain to be money well spent.

"That will be two dollars."

Ayanna hastily pulled two silver half-dollars out of her pocket and paid for the ammunition. Then she went outside to see where Hex-smell coat guy was going. He was going back toward the Fort. She watched to make sure he was going into the Fort, which he did.

Ayanna went to the Farm to report what she had seen. . .and smelled.

Elijah was there, as usual. "So this guy bought ammunition, smelled like a Hexman, and went back to the Fort; Correct?"

"Yes."

"And you can I.D. this guy if you saw him again?"

"No problem."

Elijah said, "Let's do some brainstorming here; The guy could have taken the coat off of a Hexman."

"Yes."

"The guy could be selling ammunition and/or information to the Hexmen."

"Yes."

"The smell could be from the same source of whatever it is, that makes a Hexman smell like a Hexman."

"Yes."

Elijah asked, "What do you think?"

Ayanna said, "He could have bought the coat third-hand off of another guy in the Fort who is helping the Hexmen."

"True. Nice thought."

"Thank you. Umm. . .The guy. . .bought a lot more types of ammo than a guy his age would normally have guns for."

"True, but maybe he's selling it second hand."

"True," Ayanna said. "Maybe."

Elijah said, "The guy is worth watching some more, maybe we should alert Captain Durand as to what is going on."

"Absolutely."

Elijah said, "I think I'll send Rata over to the Fort to request Frank Durand comes over."

Elijah went upstairs to get Rata.

Rata came downstairs, ran by Ayanna and said, "Hi Niña."

"Hi Rata," she said in return.

Rata went out the door toward the Fort.

Captain Durand came over and greeted Elijah and Ayanna, who were at the kitchen table. Durand took a seat at the table, along with Rata.

Elijah said, "We would like to send Ayanna over to the Fort."

"Why?"

"We have reason to believe one of your people there may be helping the Hexmen."

"Really, Elijah? Why would you say that?"

"We have some evidence that suggests it."

"Like what?"

Elijah said, "Frank, just let us come over there and look over the men's personal items once, then we'll be out of your hair."

The Captain said, "I'm going to go out on a limb here, but at the risk of being wrong again, why Ayanna?"

"Ayanna and I will team up on this one."

"Okay. Let's go do it," Captain Durand said.

"Now?" Elijah asked.

"Sure, I'll just send everyone out on a drill. I'm the Commander, you know. They'll cry bloody murder, but I haven't made them do anything for quite awhile. I don't want them to get too soft, you know."

"Good," Elijah said.

"Just come over in twenty minutes and you can have the run of the place."

Elijah and Ayanna arrived at the Fort. The Captain escorted them to the barracks. The barracks had a thick matted down bed of straw on top of a dirt floor. But there was an assortment of actual beds that were recovered from abandoned houses in the area. Some were still quite nice.

Ayanna was putting her nose on to the beds sniffing them out.

The Captain said, "What the heck is she looking for?"

Elijah said, "She's not looking. She smelling."

"Huh?"

"Yea, she's smelling."

Captain Durand said, "Come on, Elijah. Really?"

Ayanna looked at Durand with a measure of exasperation.

Durand held out his hand toward her, "Okay, sorry Ayanna, but this is a lot weirder than a little girls who is a military analyst. . ."

Elijah said, "Frank you are getting into it deeper with her. You'd be better off stopping. I thought you were going to give us the run of the place?"

"No. That's right, you just go ahead with what you are doing."

Ayanna went to several of the beds. On a couple of the beds, which were all made, she waved the blankets around in the air trying to make detection of the smell easier.

Then she got to one and said, "Ugh! She lifted the pillow and smelled it. She rolled her eyes. Right here. That's the guy."

Captain Durand went over to the bed . He read the name, "Private Jim Oliver". Not to be negative, but that guy. . .It doesn't make a lot of sense."

Elijah was going through Jim's box. Each soldier had a box at the foot of their bed. Elijah picked up a book from the box. "Here's a big Fort Wayne Indiana Telephone directory. Not real practical." He flipped the book onto the bed and it made a metallic noise. They all looked at it.

"I never heard of a book that clanked" the Captain said. He picked up the pulpy book and opened it. It was hollowed out. They stared in amazement at the loot inside; all sorts of jewelry, coins, some of them gold.

"Hey, nice watch. . ." Elijah looked at the back of the watch and saw an inscription, "Bob Timmons - Ten Years Service -Shanesville Volunteer Fire Dept."

The Captain said, "Oliver sure has a lot of money here. I can't really see how he has the money for this kind of stuff."

Elijah said, "Let's put everything back to the way it was."

They all started trying to remember how everything was stored and rearranging it until it was as close as they could remember.

Elijah asked , "When is Oliver's next day off?"

"When do you want it to be?"

"Two days. I want him to be able to make plans. Also, tell everyone the Fort will be entirely empty a week from today. In three days, change the plan."

Durand said, "Am I going to have to write this down? Today I have the Lieutenant tell Oliver he is off on the next day, and also tell the entire Fort that we will be going to Delburg in five days from today for a celebration."

Elijah said, "Oh! I like that."

"But then, three days from today I get to be the asshole and tell everyone at the Fort they can't go to the celebration."

"Tell them I said it was cancelled because of a flu epidemic, but then make sure they are all on high alert. We will actually be very busy that day."

"All right," Durand said, "I can live with this, if it helps you out."

"Thank you," Elijah said, "Ayanna. Back to the kitchen, there is work to be done."

Elijah gathered his team around the table for a meeting. "Patrick; the day after tomorrow, you and Ayanna will watch the Fort. Ayanna will show you who Private Jim Oliver is. I want you to follow him unseen without Ayanna. I suspect he will go to one of the Hex Tribes."

"Okay," Patrick said.

"Rata; First thing tomorrow as early as possible, I want you to walk to Shanesville and find out who . . .umm. . .Bob. . ."

"Timmons," Ayanna said.

"Yes, Bob Timmons. I want you to go to Shanesville and find out if he is alive and if not, what happened to him, and his wrist watch. Then get back here as fast as possible."

"Hell!" Rata said, "This job is more damn walking."

Elijah said, "Hey! What else do you have to do? There's nothing on TV."

"All right. Bob Timmons. I'll set my DVR before I go. I don't want to miss *Sons of Anarchy*." He chuckled.

Elijah said, "I have things to do here."

Rata said, "Like what? Holding down the couch?"

Elijah said, "No, this is going to be a lot bigger than you think. That's why we need complete intel and for you to get back as quickly as possible."

Chapter 32

The next day, Ayanna and Patrick took a position between the half klick walk between the Fort and Burkett's Market.

"There he is. See him coming out of the Fort?" Ayanna said.

"Where?"

"He's the guy with the dark blue coat on."

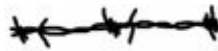
"You mean, black coat?"

"Whatever. He's pr'y gonna come over to the Store and buy some stuff, then go north."

"All right," Patrick said. "I'll go do some shopping in the store and see what he is doing."

"Okay," Ayanna said, "I'm going to go back to the House. Be careful, Patrick."

"I will, thanks."



Rata started walking before daybreak and got to Shanesville in late morning. He was walking up to inhabitants on the street, "Do you know, who Bob Timmons is?"

"No," said a young woman.

"I give up, who is he?" said a young guy.

"Sounds familiar. Is he related to Ned Timmons?", an older man said.

"No one in Shanesville goes by that name, never has been anyone by that name here," another older man said.

A couple of other people just walked by Rata without speaking, as if he couldn't be trusted. He waved a gang sign with his hands at one of them in frustration.

An older woman said, "Oh sure, I know Bob. His brother Ned is married to my cousin Dorothy. They have a son who was Township Trustee. They never wanted to clean our road when it snowed, but their son made sure the snow plow came down our road and cleaned it. Five years ago, maybe six; yea, six years ago; well, five or six, I don't really remember, the snow was just awful. At least around here it was. Where did you say you were from?"

"Um. . .Crawfordton. . ."

"Oh, do you like it over there? They sure have a lot of problems and I think if they would. . ."

"I'm just trying to find out about Bob Timmons."

"Well. . . I *was* just getting to that. You know out on Reed Road. . ."

"Where's that?"

"You go out from the State Route four miles north, but I wouldn't. Everyone out there has been killed off or left. Aren't those Hexmen just the worst. . ."

"Is Bob Dead?"

"Well yes, I thought everyone knew that. He was stubborn you know. Everyone told old Bob to get out of there. Even his wife, she's my cousin. . ."

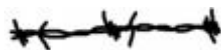
"Yea, I know."

"Oh, I didn't know you were friends. Even my cousin left because she was so scared, but Bob was one of those pig-headed people. He stayed out there and the Hexmen got him. So awful. I hear Bob was a really good guy."

"Yea, he was the best. He was with the Volunteer Fire Department for over ten years," Rata said.

"Oh! Then you know my nephew, George Deere? He goes by Buck."

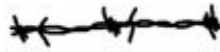
"Yea, but it is too painful for me to talk about Buck. I'm so sad, I must. . .leave. . . now." Rata put his elbow over his face in dramatic fashion and abruptly turned away and headed back to Crawfordton.



Patrick followed Jim Oliver who did indeed go north. It was a long walk. All of the landmarks were familiar. He had been down this road when they captured John Smith, or whatever his name was.

It was becoming increasingly obvious that Oliver was some kind of contact for the Hexmen. Patrick Kelly had to decide how far was he willing to go to prove that Oliver was a turncoat. Each step forward was another step closer to danger. Patrick hoped he would never have to go through all that pursuit again. He did not want to get too close to Oliver. What if Oliver had seen him and was leading him into a trap? Patrick Kelly always managed to keep a couple of trees or some other obstruction to the line of sight back to him, to avoid detection. At least he thought.

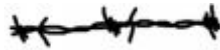
Oliver left the road and started walking back to a woodlot. Kelly decided to stay put and see what was next.



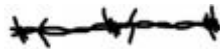
The next day Ayanna heard at school that the entire town of Crawfordton was planning to go to Delburg for a big celebration. There was going to be a circus, a flea market and beer drinking. When Ayanna got home, Phil told her the same thing.

Ayanna told Phil, "I heard the Celebration got cancelled because of a flu epidemic."

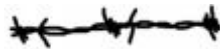
"No, that can't be right," Phil said. "That's not what I heard, and I talked to a lot of people. You may want to recheck your facts."



Elijah was out north of town with Captain Durand and the OC troops who were building fortifications. The troops were highly disappointed when they found out the Delburg celebration was cancelled. They were told instead that the construction work would continue for at least two more days.



Patrick Kelly watched Jim Oliver come out of the woods. He was coming back up the road. Patrick decided to hide in some brush that ran along beside a fence row. He waited for Oliver to pass, then to get down the road. Oliver was found to be walking miles to a woodlot to do something for a few minutes only to return the same way. That would not be enough to convict in the old days, but it was very damning now.



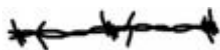
Rata got back and reported to Elijah that it was almost for sure that Oliver got the watch from a Hexman. Elijah told him to go back to the Farm before someone put him to work on the fortifications.

Oliver's Lieutenant was told by Durand to alert him once Oliver came back to town. The Lieutenant told the Captain as requested.

Elijah spoke to Patrick, who told him what Oliver was up to. The men in the OC Company were surprised to see Elijah slap Oliver in handcuffs.

Elijah took Oliver to the Farm. There was no chess game involved. Oliver was re-handcuffed to the riding mower with both hands. Elijah requested around the clock armed surveillance of the prisoner. As a gesture to Rata, they got together and moved the couch out to the shed so Rata could lay down on his watch.

Ayanna was exempt from watching Oliver, because If an invasion happened, the prisoner was to be shot and whoever was guarding him was to get Bella and evacuate to the Fort.



The next day Phil found out the Delburg celebration had been cancelled because of a flu outbreak. All he could do was to wonder if Ayanna was also psychic.



Elijah and Captain Durand went to the House to report to Jayden that they expected a Hexmen attack and that they were ready for them. The Crawfordton Guard was to be on high alert to protect the town from all sides.



The next day a large tribe of Hexmen showed up from the north lusting for wanton total destruction of Crawfordton. They advanced with all certainty that they could not be stopped, believing Crawfordton defense to be skeletal.

When the Hexmen approached a small outpost on the north they observed a single guard running extremely fast in the opposite direction when he saw the Hexmen coming. The Hexmen maintained their methodical advance. It was obvious to the Hexmen that there was no reason to think there would be any resistance. There was no need to go to the fort. They went straight for the center of town to pillage.

When the Hexmen got to very close range to the north outpost, a medium machinegun crew who were hiding there opened fire on them. Then upon hearing the staccato sound of the machinegun, the Hexmen were further surprised as troops popped up out of their covered spider holes. All the troops were killing Hexmen who were easy prey standing out in the open. The spider holes were arranged to create deadly interlocking fire. There was nowhere for the Hexmen to go.

In the shed, Rata heard the shooting. He got up off of the couch and pointed his pistol at Jim Oliver's head. "Hear that? It's time for me to give you wings."

"No! This isn't right!" Oliver said. "I've got relatives there. Stop. No. You can't do it! I have a right to a trial! Please! No!"

"Say 'hi' to your Hexpals when you get to Hell," Rata put a shot into Oliver's forehead and then he went to the farmhouse to get Bella.

The Hexmen were still getting massacred. Some tried to get away and others tried to charge. Most stayed down and hastily returned fire. Then a command was shouted and they tried to retreat *en masse*. The Hexmen's joint effort was futile and costly. When some did get pulled back, Guardsmen of Lt. Murphy's Platoon-D was there pouring on additional fire.

The Hexmen raiding party was completely destroyed. Over seventy Hexmen were killed. Three Confederation Troops were lost, and several were injured. No Guardsmen were hurt.

Chapter 33

TEN YEARS LATER

Ohio was no longer a Confederation, but now reorganized into an independent State. The northeast part of Ohio, which included Cleveland, was still controlled by the Axis. The border with the Axis regime had not changed in several years.

Ohio was part of the Continental Army Military Organization (CAMO) with other independent states throughout the Midwest.

Ohio was a law and order State because they were proactive in pursuing those who caused the problems. The clans found it better to carry out their bandenkrieg in Indiana and Kentucky. This vigorous prosecution of the clans in Ohio did make it worse for those States.

The Chinese-Backed Mexicans had not made further gains in territory, but it was thought that Mexico would annex the southwest, as they consolidated their hold on that vast region. Many Mexicans considered this area to be rightfully theirs, based upon nineteenth century history.

The southeast was starting to congeal into black and white areas. The blacks controlled the cotton belt area, and the whites controlled almost everything else.

Canada was fearful of the Axis, so was careful not to appear tilting toward one side or the other of the Axis-CAMO conflict.

Without the restraints of the old US Federal Government tax and regulations, Texas was turning back into an economic dynamo.

The refineries in the Lone Star Republic were now running in fits and starts, but enough to bring hard money into the ornery Country. Texas was pretty much hands off by those in their neighborhood because it was said that Texas had purchased at least one medium range nuclear missile from Israel.

Because of Texas, gasoline could be bought for the unreasonably high price of fifty cents silver per gallon. The gasoline demand for the military or farming was extremely high. States closer to Texas and friendly to Texas got a better deal.

The automotive junkyard industry sprung up almost overnight. Everyone had a Chevy or Toyota 2015 or whenever this or that part for a dime.

Every year it was still the same. The Ohio Army came to each town on Mayday, and rounded up all of the twenty year-olds for their mandatory five years of military service. Now it was Ayanna's turn. The Ohio Army Captain had made his visit there and made the announcement, they would depart the next day.

Phil and Amy were in their seventies now. They were in decent health, but were slowing down now.

Phil was going to be lost without Ayanna. When Phil looked at Ayanna, all the crazy memories of her youth came rushing back into his consciousness. The trouble she got him into; hunting; the bullet he took; the battles; military discussions; the hugs.

Ayanna had grown from a dysfunctional troubled little girl to a woman who knew how to handle people, her own emotions, and small arms, extremely well. The problems of her past did not control her, but she would never be totally rid of those lingering ghosts any more than any other imperfect adult who ever lived.

Ayanna was collecting as much gear as she could carry for the march she would be taking to the Ohio Third Army Training Center. It was all laid out on the dining room table so she could see what was going into her pack.

Amy placed a small New Testament and Psalms on the table. "Here, you got room for this, soldier."

"Thanks." Ayanna inspected the semi-automatic pistol that Phil gave her as a going away present, and a means of self-defense. Phil could see that it was more than just inspecting the pistol, she was staring into it like a crystal ball. Wondering, maybe worrying about what her future would be.

In a way, Ayanna would be glad to get a fresh start. She never really clicked with those of her own age group. Her peers always had some kind of negative adjective to describe her, even to her face. "Geek", "weirdo", "zombie", or even "random". Amy came into the dining room and sighed. "I sure hope you don't find some boy out there away from here."

Ayanna half smiled. No matter where she went, there was always going to be an available boy, that was a given. But Ayanna learned the basic fact about boys even before Ella demonstrated proof positive in the garden for the Hexmen, that boys thought with the male member of their bodies.

"Little darlin'. . ."

"Don't call me that right now, Amy. I don't think I can handle it right now." It was a long hike to the Third Army HQ, then possible deployment on the other side of the

State. There were no guarantees that she would ever come back.

"Well. . .What I was going to say was, there are plenty of nice boys around here. Don't go finding one someplace else."

"I'll try to keep that in my thought processes. I think I'll go visit Elijah one more time."

Ayanna walked over to the Farm, probably for the last time. Elijah was sitting there with the chess board, when she walked in, reading a sheet of paper.

"Ayanna," Elijah said. "I've been waiting on you. It's your move."

Ayanna smirked and took a seat. "What's with this chess? We rarely finish a game."

"Oh, it's not about the chess, Ayanna. I thought you had that figured out long before now." He made a move.

"Oh I did." Ayanna moved. "When you want to interrogate someone, you tell them to 'move' when you want them to quit thinking or talking. You can also tell something about how competent they are by their moves. Who knows what else you are doing while this game is going on. But you know what? I just wanted to play the game once in awhile, you know?"

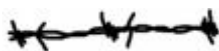
"Not me," Elijah said. "I didn't want to get my ass kicked by a damn little girl." He started crying hard, looking at her.

Ayanna broke down as well.

Elijah got up and turned his head, wiping his tears. "The world is a big place, Ayanna. You are too big for this little place. You've got to move on. You've got to use what you have to make the world a better place for as many people as you can. We can't be selfish here, we can't keep you here. Don't come back." Elijah moved toward Ayanna,

Ayanna got out of the chair and hugged Elijah. "I love you, Elijah."

"Me too."



It was time. Ayanna had her pack and was heading out the door. Phil and Amy clutched their little darlin' one last time before she left. They were scared that she would not be able to return. They were scared for her safety. Five years in the Ohio Army was a long time.

After Ayanna went out the front door, Amy turned to Phil for comfort.

The Crawfordton Ohio Army recruits assembled on Harris Road directly in front of the House. The town was a lot less populous than it was a decade or so ago. So instead of a couple of hundred recruits, there were only forty two sobbing young adults who had spent most of their lives trying to survive the collapse the older generations left for them to deal with.

The entire town was there to bid the recruits farewell. Jayden saluted those who had served in the Crawfordton Guard.

The order was given by the Ohio Army Captain and the recruits started marching out. The Ohio Army could have sent a bus for them to travel the sixty miles to the HQ, but it was tradition, and part of their physical training.

The march was long, but there was very little complaining. This generation was one that knew how to handle hardship, and took this event in stride.

They arrived at the HQ on the second day. The camp was a bare-bones no frills place. There were no tanks, helicopters, or heavy artillery around. Just a few buildings with an Ohio flag flying in front of them.

The recruits met their drill master and were assigned quarters. Then they were given obstacle course training. Ayanna finished somewhere in the middle of the pack.

Then they were given testing on military science. All of the recruits knew they would be in the Army at some point so tried to do some preparatory work ahead of time for it. Ayanna thought the test was extremely easy.

A couple of days later her name, along with several others were called upon to take another test. This test was harder, but she still felt she did pretty well at it.

Ayanna suspected that she may be on some kind of fast track to moving up in rank; which was her lifelong goal.

The Major was looking at Ayanna's file when she went into his office. "Crawford, I commend you on the excellent result on your testing."

"Thank you, Sir."

"You did as well as anyone. Outstanding."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Crawford, you are being sent to Sandusky Bay for further training."

"Sandusky Bay, Sir? What is that?"

"That is the home of the Ohio Navy."

"What? Navy?"

"Yes, Navy. Who do you think protects our north shore from the Axis? Here's the thing. You did as well as anyone on the Army testing criteria, but on the Navy testing criteria you finished in first by a large margin."

"But, Sir. This is a mistake, I'm not a navy person."

"You are now. You leave tomorrow by car."

Ayanna sat there in a daze, trying to figure out how to object.

"Anything else?" the Major asked.

"No, sir"

"Dismissed."

Ayanna got up and saluted the Major.

Nothing could have seemed more wrong than being shanghaied into the Navy. It made no sense at all. She had spent her whole life running around on solid ground and had never even seen a large body of water. She never even learned how to swim.

It seemed her unspoken dream of leading a large army into battle was never going to happen. That was over now. So now what?

Ayanna felt important being delivered by car all the way to the Naval Station. She almost forgot what it was like to travel by car. She saw more sights on that day than most of the rest of her previous life. The driver didn't try to say anything and she didn't try to engage him. She just sat there and took it all in.

Travelling up Interstate-75 seemed to go by very fast. Ayanna saw ramshackle houses and an endless amount of abandoned vehicles alongside of the road. The countryside looked decimated and poor, but it looked a lot less dangerous. Maybe there was hope for the future.

Chapter 34

Sandusky Bay Naval Station

Ayanna got out of the car and felt the fresh breeze coming off of Lake Erie. The water was choppy and pleasant sounding. Erie looked like an ocean.

Ayanna looked back at the driver. "You know where I'm supposed to go?"

"Nope." Then he pulled the car away.

There were a number of vessels moored at several newly constructed piers. At a dry-dock was a huge ship that was under construction. She couldn't stop staring at it. She studied everything about it. Why would Ohio even need such a ship?

"Seaman!"

Ayanna turned around, seeing a man dressed in all white with a blue baseball style cap. "Me?"

"Yes. Report to that big white building over there."

Seaman? The very idea. . .Erie was not a sea, but a lake. She was not a man. There was nothing whatsoever right about being called a "seaman". "Lakewoman" made more sense.

Ayanna proceeded to the building. She wondered if everyone else was wearing white. She still had her desert pattern camouflage fatigues on. She went in and saw a bunch of twenty year-old men and women standing there in their underwear.

A older guy was buzzing off the hair of the next person in line. "Seaman, get your clothes off and get in line."

Ayanna sighed. She was in the process of following orders and noticed that she was being checked out by a couple of other seamen, who were actually men. How demeaning.

Ayanna got in line and used her arms to cover up what she could like everyone else was doing. The hair thing didn't bother her so much. She was not in love with her hair that much anyhow.

After the hair was done, she was handed two sets of clothes, a dark blue hat, and a duffle bag. She put on the clothes. Her head felt like it was freezing until she put the hat on.

The guy handing her the clothes didn't do too badly sizing her up. A little baggy, but okay. The man said something unclear,

"What?" Ayanna asked.

"I said go out back to the other building!"

Ayanna found her way to the other building after the snappish instructions.

The room was full of about fifty sailors, all dressed in white. Some older men were at the front waiting on the last ones to assemble.

"Attention!" someone shouted.

"All right. I am Captain Bernard, skipper of the big fish out there, the OSS Justin D. LeHew. You, ladies and gentlemen, are the crew."

"A hubbub went through the sailors."

"Quiet! The Captain is talking!"

"The job of everyone in this room is to help contractors construct the LeHew. Do a good job, because your life will depend upon it. The way you do this, is you do whatever you are told to do, and do it the way you are told to do it. The LeHew is going to help make Ohio the superior naval power in the Lake. The LeHew will help to plug up the Axis from sending vessels into the Lake, and possibly invading Ohio on the north shore. The mission of this ship is critical, and it is secret. For now you are not allowed to send mail to anyone. We are going to send mail to your primary family. So do not try to or you will be subject to discipline. The officers will come up now and read names. When you hear your name, go with that officer."

Ayanna heard her name called and went forward.

"Crawford?"

"Yes sir."

"I'm Lieutenant Kirkendahl."

"Nice to meet you, Lieutenant." Ayanna saluted. She noticed that the navy Lieutenant insignia was the same as the Army Captain insignia. How confusing.

"Yea, Go with Petty Officer Vinton." Kirkendahl saluted back. "Make sure you write your name on the name patch with your marker."

"Yes, sir. Yes, Petty Officer Vinton." Ayanna did not know what naval ranks were. This naval crap was going to be a pain to get used to, if ever.

Vinton said, "Its aye-aye around here, Crawford. And you can call me 'Vinnie'; just 'Vinnie'."

"Aye aye, Vinnie."

"That will work, Crawford. Follow me."

They went up the steep gangplank to board the LeHew.

Vinnie said, "I was told you could read."

"Aye Vinnie, but I can't swim."

Vinnie laughed. "Let's hope you never need to."

They walked by some beefy young guys who were heating up rivets to pound into place on the ship's all steel construction. What a horrible job. Certainly nothing Ayanna wanted any part of."

Ayanna asked Vinnie, "Is this ship going to bankrupt the State?" This project made Fort Wilcox at home look like nothing. They made their way to the front of the ship.

"Yes, its plenty expensive but it is a converted freighter with reinforced armor."

They continued to the bow of the ship.

"Here it is," Vinnie said.

"Whoooa!" Ayanna said, looking at an eight-inch deck gun.

Vinnie said, "This baby is not modern. In fact, it is new, but of a very old design. It came out of a foundry in Indiana." Vinnie pointed at one of the cannonballs. "But if this gun puts *that* on your boat, you will have a problem."

"How far will it shoot?"

"Five hundred yards, no problem."

Ayanna asked, "You've shot it?"

Vinnie said, "Not really. . .what we need is for you to know everything possible about how this sweetheart is made; how it works; how to hit the target; how to fix it; everything. We have drawings here and an operation manual for you to study. Know it front and back."

Ayanna thought, this is getting weirder by the minute. There was so much that she didn't know. She realized her jaw was still open. "Is that all?"

"That's your job Crawford. We're counting on you."

At least Ayanna figured she was not going to have to do anything as treacherous as metal working.

Chapter 35

After a couple of days, two things became clear to Ayanna about the cannon. First, the cannon was a simple gun to shoot. About like a muzzle loader. There were some safety precautions that had to be followed.

Secondly, it was extremely hard to hit anything with the cannon. There was page after page of mathematical equations on ballistic trajectory. No one had ever taught her any of this it looked totally cryptic, she wanted to give up.

"Hey!"

Ayanna looked up. A large recruit was moving a section of chain across the deck.

"The man said, 'Is that all you do, is sit there and read that stuff?'"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I was told to."

The big guy came over to where Ayanna was sitting and dripped drops of sweat down on her documents.

Ayanna took her sleeve and wiped it off.

"Sorry, Crawford."

Ayanna looked at his name patch, "No worries, Garfield. What they got you doing here?"

"I'm carrying stuff around for the welders right now. I'm gonna be the guy who shoots the cannon here."

"Oh you are, huh?"

"Yes."

"So who told you that?"

"Vinnie."

"Garfield, do you know how to hit the target with the cannon?"

"I guess you just aim it at it."

"Nice." Phil always told Ayanna to simplify complex things in her mind. Break them down. Ayanna imagined that she could hear Phil tell her, "You don't need all that dang math. Just shoot the dang thing."

At least by studying the math, she was able to determine some things about shooting the cannon. There has to be a maximum distance angle to compensate for ball drop. If you lower the gun higher or lower than that angle, the next shot won't go as far. There was nothing in the stupid documents about factoring in the ship's speed or the target's speed. Even the wind speed could affect the flight of the heavy cannonball.

Maybe during the next five years she would never have to shoot the stupid thing at the enemy. Firing a cannon with no training. How stupid is this? They would never leave such a thing to chance back in Crawfordton. "Hey Vinnie!"

"What Crawford?!"

"Doesn't anyone here know how to shoot a nineteenth century cannon, and hit a moving target while *we're* moving, in a strong wind?"

Petty Officer Vinton said, "Well, since you put it that way, No. But actually, it sounds like you are starting to get it."

"You guys aren't asking much, are you? This is pissing me off."

"Crawford! We don't have anyone else! I can't help it!"

"Why not!?"

"Honestly. . . Because the last cannon blew up and they all got killed."

"What?! Oh now I feel waaay better! Damn! Sorry for your loss, but you could have said something!"

"Now calm down Crawford. I was going to tell you when we go through the steps."

"Really?! When was this supposed to be?!"

"Tomorrow."

"Great! All I have to do, according to Garfield here is to 'Aim the gun'. No problem." Ayanna went back over to her documents and started studying them again.

Garfield looked over and shrugged his shoulders, wondering if he had said anything wrong.

Ayanna slammed the documents back down on the deck, "Here's the deal, Vinnie. I might be responsible for all of the lives on this ship someday, and if I can't make this gun hit the enemy, or get close enough so they will stop laughing, then we could all die!

"Crawford!" Lieutenant Kirkendahl said. "I want to speak to you in the office."

"Aye aye sir," she saluted.

The Lieutenant led Ayanna down the gangplank to the Station Office. "Crawford, I heard what you said out there."

"I'm just very stressed over this whole thing, Sir."

"Actually, I like what I am hearing. You won't accept failure. You want things done right. We were considering it, but now I've made my decision. Crawford, I'm going to make you ensign over the main gun."

"Sir? What's an ensign?"

"You still report to me, but Vinnie reports to you now. So, no more frustration with him or yelling. You need to be confident. Let Vinnie do any yelling that needs done."

"Aye, Lieutenant. Thank you." Ayanna hoped the promotion came with a pay raise. Her pay was only a fraction of what she made as a spy. "I do have one concern, Sir."

"Yes?"

"I noticed there's no rifling in the barrel of our cannon. It will never be very accurate."

"We know, Crawford. It's primitive. They don't have the technology to rifle the barrels yet. Do the best you can with it, Ensign."

"Aye, Lieutenant."

Chapter 36

"Clear the Deck!" The Lieutenant commanded. The OSS LeHew was still in dry-dock, but the cannon trial could still be completed. The gun crew consisted of Petty Officer Vinnie, Seaman Garfield, a skinny Asian Seaman named Giang, and Seaman Brice, a petite woman.

Most of the crew had evacuated the LeHew as a precaution. But they still wanted to watch the event.

The Captain had a small lifeboat taken out about 300 yards and told the gun crew, "I dare you to hit it."

Ayanna sighed, waiting for the important event to unfold one way or the other. "All right, Vinnie, take it from the top. Fire."

Brice put a charge of powder into the end of the muzzle loading cannon. Giang pushed the "charge", which is a cloth baggie of gunpowder down into the breach. Garfield's upper body flexed as he picked up the steel cannonball and set it into the muzzle. Brice opened the air vent on the breach of the cannon and inserted a fuse until it touched the charge. Vinnie lit it.

"Everyone back!" Vinnie warned.

Everyone on the deck, including Captain Bernard and Lt. Kirkendahl ran back as far as they could and still see the cannon and the target.

They waited. About a minute went by.

Vinnie said, "This is taking a good bit longer than I thought."

"Yea," Ayanna said. "But it has to. . ." BLAM! The whole ship shook from the blast.

"Whoa!" Brice said.

Garfield said, "That was awesome! Did you see that?!"

Ayanna said, "Yea. We missed by. . .a lot. Let's go through this again, Vinnie."

"Aye Ensign."

The crew returned to the cannon.

Ayanna said, "Lower the barrel 10 degrees, go right 5 degrees."

Garfield made the adjustments. Brice was in the process of putting the next charge into the cannon.

"Stop!" Ayanna said. The crew looked at Ayanna.

"Vinnie! Close the vent to suffocate any sparks in the cannon. Giang, use that sponge. This must be done every time, even in a battle."

"Aye, Ensign"

The sponge was on a long stick. It was kept damp and used to snuff out any sparks left after firing the cannon so when the next charge of powder was put into the muzzle it didn't explode too soon.

After Giang sponged the barrel, Brice put in the charge.

"Were going to do this the fast way this time," Ayanna said. "Giang, use that ramrod and punch a hole in that charge so it ignites faster."

Giang made sure the charge was punched. Then Garfield put in the cannonball.

Ayanna said, "Brice, instead of inserting a fuse, just put a bit of powder on the vent, the Vinnie touch it with the candle."

The instant Vinnie touched the candle to the vent the cannon fired. This time the entire crew was standing next to the gun when it fired.

"Cool!" Garfield said, "This is so awesome!"

The ball sent up a spout of water up quite a distance away from the lifeboat. Ayanna was at a loss. There was no way to do a bunch of calculating in a battle. By the time the cannon gets fired, the target, or they would move. This situation was an embarrassment. Why was she even doing this? There were a lot of other things she would be better at.

Brice immediately shut the vent.

"Good work, Brice," Ayanna said. "Hey Garfield."

"Aye."

"*Aim* the cannon."

"Um. . ." Garfield was taken aback.

"Garfield. Aim it," Ensign Crawford repeated.

"Aye!" Without looking at the markers, Garfield stared at the lifeboat and made some adjustments.

Vinnie barked, "Come on crew! Quickly, do not miss a step!"

The crew went through the steps three times as fast and the cannon was lit. It fired. The LeHew heaved again when the cannon fired. A spout of water went up about ten or fifteen yards in front of the lifeboat.

"Woooooooooo! Yes!" Garfield pumped his fist.

Giang waved the ramrod in a victory dance. Brice was jumping up and down clapping.

Ayanna's head throbbed from the blasting. It was not her passion.

Captain Bernard said, "That's enough. Save the ammunition. I don't want my lifeboat ruined. Good work everyone."

The Captain and the Lieutenant left the fore deck.

"Awww!" Garfield said. "Man, I love this! I wanted to do some more!"

Ayanna was still concerned about safety. "We are going to do a dry run on this one hundred times. No powder or ball. If anyone messes up with the vent or the sponge, we start all over. Is that clear?"

The crew said "Aye" in unison.

Ensign Crawford said, "I'll keep track of how many times you do it. Vinnie, take charge."

"Aye, Ensign."

Chapter 37

Ayanna thought the navy life, compared to what she was used to was rather cushy. A decent bed in the barracks. The food was like having a feast. The work was different, but not physically demanding.

Every day the gun crew spent most of their time working on the OSS LeHew's construction. They spent most of their time applying a paint that seemed like it was of such low quality that it was a waste of time and money.

Ayanna was put in various areas of the ship to increase her knowledge of it. The engine room, navigation, fire fighting, etc. She was not thrilled with any of it. However, it was her nature to put forth the best effort that she could on any job.

Even though the construction work was their main task, the gun crew still had daily firing drills, all dry runs.

One day while at the cannon, a group of six seamen marched up to the bow with AR-15s. The Ensign, a very short guy told them to fire. They each used up a magazine of ammunition. One of them had his gun jam.

Ayanna said, "Hey! What are you doing?"

The Ensign said, "We're doing a deck defense drill."

"What?!" Ayanna walked over to the seaman who had the jammed rifle. "This thing is filthy. Why would you walk out here in a drill and waste a bunch of ammunition like that? What if we were firing the deck gun?"

The short Ensign said, "Why don't you mind your own business! What makes you think you know anything about guns?! You probably have never ever shot one!"

"You don't have a clue what you are talking about!"

"All I ever see you do is sitting there at that cannon, or playing like you are firing it!"

Hearing the shouting, Lieutenant Kirkendahl came to investigate. "Ensigns. Let's go down to the office."

Ayanna sighed. That's twice now she had been pulled off of the deck to go to the office for outbursts. This time may not work out so well. Ayanna could hear Amy's

voice in her head, "God is getting you back for talking like a sailor by making you go into the Navy."

The two Ensigns sat in front of Lieutenant Kirkendahl's desk.

The Lieutenant said, "Right now we are all trying to learn our jobs. Ohio is not a big maritime State. And our cannon is new."

Ayanna said, "There is nothing for me to learn to do his job."

Kirkendahl said, "Oh really? What makes you say that?"

Ayanna said, "I understand battle tactics. . .fully. . .on land. And I know how to keep a gun clean so it rarely jams up."

The other Ensign said, "Hey! Guns jam!"

"That's right," the Lieutenant said.

Ayanna asked, "Do those seamen know how to take down and clean their gun?"

The short Ensign said, "We don't assign specific assault rifles to specific seamen."

"That's a problem," Ayanna said. "And why would we train them to walk around and shoot? What are they supposed to be doing? Can't they do more than that?"

"Like what?" the Lieutenant asked.

"Like at least hitting the deck when they are firing."

The short Ensign started laughing. "What do you think they are, action heroes or something? Why can't your cannon even hit a rowboat?"

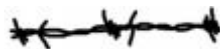
Ayanna just took it. Phil said just keep taking it before you knife them, or something like that.

The Lieutenant said, "I can't believe how lowly you Ensigns think of each other. Since you both think the other has such an easy job, I am going to have you swap jobs now. I was wanting to cross train everyone as much as possible anyway."

Ayanna said, "I look forward to my new responsibilities, Sir."

"Me too," the other Ensign said.

"You both start tomorrow."



It was time to do something about it. Now was a good time since they were all on shore leave, otherwise known as a day off. But who would she get to show her how to swim? The logical choice was Vinnie. He was older than the recruits so they wouldn't get the wrong idea. He already knew Ayanna did not know how to swim.

At mess time, Ayanna saw Vinnie setting with a few other Petty Officers. "Vinnie, can I see you after lunch?"

"Aye, Ensign."

After she left the table they started chortling.

Then later Vinnie met Ayanna in the hall. "Vinnie, can you show me how to swim? You don't have to."

"It wouldn't do for a navy officer to not be able to swim. It would be my privilege. Sure."

Later that day they met away from the Station and got into the Lake. Vinnie taught Ayanna to float, which she couldn't do very well because she had a high body density; a lot of muscle and small amount of fat. But she trusted him to hold her up while floating on her back so she could get used to the sensation. After she got used to doing it she found it very pleasant. Vinnie also had her float on her stomach while holding her breath. Soon she was treading water.

Vinnie said, "Now all you have to do Ensign is to propel yourself through the water. You know, use your arms and legs.

She was moving! It was an enjoyable sensation. But then she panicked a bit when she realized she was getting in some deep water.

"You're fine, Sir. Now just turn and come back."

Ayanna came back and snorted water out of her nose. "Thanks so much, Vinnie. I had no idea it was so easy. I was just scared of the water all this time."

"Glad to help."

"I'm just going to stay here and practice."

"I'll stay here up on the shore. Just in case. I got nothing better to do right now."

"Thank you." Ayanna realized that while wearing the white undies in the water, she was probably putting on a type of "Ella show" for Vinnie, but put it out of her mind. He was being harmless.

While Ayanna was practicing, Vinnie told her that the crew missed her. They didn't want that new guy. Now Ayanna wondered if she was better off or not starting over with a new crew. "They were going to move us around anyhow, Vinnie."

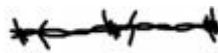
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In the morning Ayanna met with her Squad on the deck. The Squad was led by Petty Officer Glass. The first order of business was to issue guns to the six Squad members. Then, Ayanna gave them training on completely tearing down the rifles and cleaning them out. They put them together and tore them down a half dozen times.

The following day, the Squad never set foot on the LeHew. Ayanna wanted to train them on land. She ran them around, explaining inferior force tactics and setting ambushes. Then she had them construct practice trenches, and spider holes.

None of the men showed any zeal for doing their job. They didn't feel it was important. Was it the way she was training them? The Deck Gun Crew showed a lot more enthusiasm than this Squad.

Ayanna wanted to give up again. This was going nowhere. It's no wonder they didn't get any training. It all seemed so pointless. Rather than waste full days putting energy into something not useful, she put the Squad back into the general labor pool for getting the LeHew's construction done.



Later that week it was time to launch the OSS LeHew. The Admiral of the Ohio Navy was there, along with other senior military officers. The large ship slid back into the water. She had a lot lower waterline, with all of the added armor. A tug pulled the LeHew up to the pier and the crew went up the much lowered gangplank to board.

The LeHew was to put on a demonstration for the Admiral, so they definitely wanted to fire off the deck gun.

Ayanna thought she would just have her squad hoist a lifeboat down into the water and the squad, in full gear would get into the boat, and row away from the mother ship. The Captain thought it was a fine idea and approved it.

The Admiral and company got into their staff car and drove around the Marblehead Peninsula so they could see the LeHew on the open waters of the Lake.

Ayanna was surprised at the speed of the ship for its size. It must be using up a lot of valuable fuel that could be used on tractors out in the fields to raise crops.

Out in the open water they saw other ships. A large vessel, about the size of the LeHew, was the WSS Green Bay, the Admiral's flagship. The Green Bay was armed with a couple of heavy machine guns, and who knows what else.

There were several other ships in the flotilla. It was not clear what they were used for, but the display of naval power by the standards of the day was impressive.

The deck gun fired. Ayanna took that as her cue for her sluggish Squad to lower the boat and climb down the cargo net into it.

The Admiral was looking through his binoculars. The Admiral said, "Now I like that."

"What is that sir," an underling asked, "the cannon?"

"Oh yea. You gotta like the cannon, but look at those seamen in that landing boat. I don't like it."

"I see them. That does seem a little odd."

The Admiral looked awhile longer. "Oh I love their initiative. What I meant by 'odd' was that Marines should have green uniforms. . .and a ship more suitable for amphibious landings."

"Marines, Sir?"

"Yes, I think we have out there the nucleus to build the Ohio Marine Corps." The Admiral turned to the shadowy contact he made through the Ohio Army. "We're starving for top young talent, just like our enemy is. They say she more than passes every test they can throw at her, practically reinventing the answers. What do you think, Williams? Is your woman up to the task?"

Elijah said, "I'm pretty sure there's nothing on Earth that could restrain her from taking an offer like building the Marine Corps. Do me a personal favor Admiral."

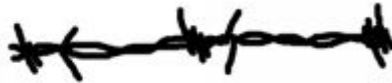
"Tell me."

"Offer her the job over a game of chess," Elijah said.

"Find me some more people like that, and I'll play *Candyland* with them if they'll agree."

THE END

Independent States of America



Chapter 1

Near LeClaire, Iowa

The letter carrier's legs were starting to get sore as she peddled her bike on the last leg of her Tuesday mail route. Each Post Office was now receiving and sending mail at the torrid pace of once per week, except in the winter time when the trips were without bicycles and less frequent. She dropped off her last bundle, and switched bags with the last mail clerk of a nearby village who she would see again the following Tuesday. The mail she picked up would be taken back with her to the district office, to be sorted.

All the roads were falling into severe disrepair since the great financial collapse. But very few could afford a car, which they quit making and importing years ago. Not only was no one from the Highway Department working on the roads, there *was* no Highway Department. In fact, for a number of years after the collapse, most of the functions of government were ignored. All of the original government entities had disappeared, including the fire department, health department, welfare, immigration, and social services.

When the country fell apart, there was no government. Then, little by little, families formed into clans, which formed into city-states, then larger areas, until there were new governments. But all of this reformation was carried out by those with varying ideas of the way things should be run. So there was no coordinated effort among the new nations of the former United States to put it all back together again.

The loss of government function that had the most impact on the Country, was police and rescue. While the police were gone, many, if not most people chose to behave very badly. Murder and mayhem was commonplace. Only those who could defend themselves had a chance to survive. Many in the Country did not own guns, and therefore perished. It is inevitable that, when given the chance, man will behave poorly.

It was also inevitable that weed seeds would always find ways to start growing within the cracks on the road. Then the tiny vegetation grew, it miraculously forced the mighty cracks in the asphalt to open more, providing space for even more opportunistic plants to find a bit of organic matter to claim. Vegetation along side of the road had sprung up, including some moderately sized trees now, whose roots tried to crawl under the road. Wild animals occasionally scampered across the road, or in the case of groundhogs, waddled across. But as long as a bicyclist cautiously watched their path,

albeit sometimes very carefully, they would minimize the risk of hitting a rough spot and losing control. Sometimes it was worth the investment of time and effort to just stop and fill some gravel or soil into a particularly scary pothole.

It would soon be the best time of the day. Time to head home to see her family. Barbara's husband would come out of the family garden covered with soil and greet her passionately. The children would mob her, including the little one with all of his toothless slobber. The dog would join the fun and also go insane, and the chickens would scatter in the daily pandemonium. The thought of the bedlam of the daily predictable scene almost made her start laughing out loud.

There was reason to feel good about things. Times were getting better. It had been fifteen years since the great collapse of the Dollar. Iowa was now an independent State within the Confederation known as the Independent States of America. The government, made up of a dozen Midwestern States, was gradually becoming more stable.

The economy also was gaining some stability. There was a trickle of gasoline being imported from Texas. Not enough to fuel every operable car, but every half hour or so you could see an old gasoline powered car motoring down a main highway. There were still not very many food stores, but most people had enough old silver money to trade for the staples they needed, and an occasional luxury that they wanted.

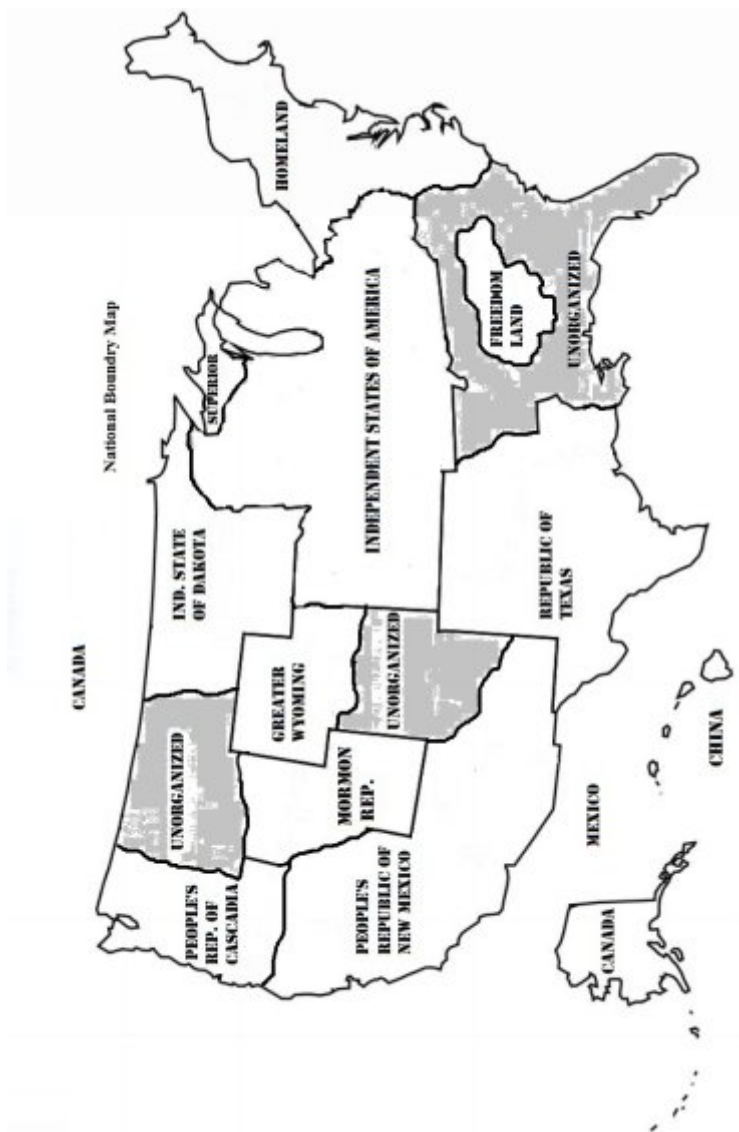
Barbara was satisfied with her gig as a letter carrier. Each day of the week was a different route. Anticipating the end of her day, she worked herself harder on the bike. She raised her red Postal Service cap and wiped the sweat from her brow with her forearm.

Being a postal letter carrier was hard physical work, but things could be a lot worse, she thought, she could be a grunt in the Continental Army. Residents of all of the States of the ISA required mandatory military service from the ages of 20-25. But the Postal Service of the Independent States of America was also a branch of the military. So Barbara was able to do her military service at home instead of being on the front lines, waiting for Homeland, or some clan to attack them.

The United Nations was no longer a part of the US Homeland Security - UN Axis, which controlled the East. So the tyrannical communist-led nation made up of former US eastern States simply chose to call itself by the quaint name of, "Homeland". The ISA's war with the Homeland Axis ended over ten years ago, but there were still occasional border clashes from time to time. The ISA had also threatened to go to war with Homeland over commercial navigation rights through Lake Ontario and the St.

Lawrence Seaway. But Homeland was unwilling to do anything that would give their enemies' economy a jumpstart, so they would not budge on the issue.

The scenery along the Mississippi was very pleasant. It was perfect weather. It wouldn't have surprised Barbara to see a herd of unicorns cross the road on such a perfect day. That was her last thought on Earth as the bullet penetrated her skull.



Chapter 2

Near Crawfordton, Ohio

Liam Thompson bicycled the mail from the towns of; Delburg, Crawfordton, Shanesville, and a few other rural points to a distribution hub on Interstate 75. Today Liam was picking up from, and delivering to, Crawfordton, his hometown.

Liam was fulfilling his obligatory five years in the military by riding the route. It was not always an easy job. It was the opinion of all letter carriers, that bad weather was the worst thing about it. Some days, Liam found that it was also pretty tough to do the job

if he felt physically run down. He kept telling himself that the guys in the Army had it a lot worse. He had learned enough as a youth, and saw enough about war, to know that he did not want to participate in any more of it than he had to.

Liam was just a little kid when the collapse hit the US. He could remember the carefree days, and especially ice cream. He could only dream about how much he liked it, and hoped that one day he could savor its creamy goodness once again.

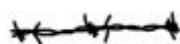
BAM! Liam was hit in the backside of his upper right leg by a searing hot bullet and he lost control of the bicycle. The shock and pain was incredible, but Liam knew immediately that he had been shot, and did all he could to take cover by crashing the bike into the ditch to increase his chance of survival. He fell down into the three foot deep ditch, landing on his back. The impact took his breath away.

Incapacitated from the fall as much as the gunshot wound, Liam could barely move to pull his pistol out of its holster as he crouched down. He positioned himself to fire back if the attacker showed himself.

He could barely move, but he held the pistol and peered up out of the ditch to see who was out there. Another shot rang out and a bullet hit the road in front of him and ricocheted very close to him. He was afraid to move from a known safe spot. But how long would it remain safe? Maybe he could lay low until someone would come by. That might be a long time. He also wanted to keep tabs on his attacker once in awhile, just in case the sniper made a move toward him. He looked at his leg. It was bleeding profusely. There wasn't going to be any waiting tactic. He knew without some kind of miracle, he would be done for. Why would someone shoot him, just to rob the mail? Everyone in the ISA knew that the mailmen would not carry anything of value, mainly so robbers would not attack them, and they were armed. He often questioned the need to carry his pistol, but rules were rules.

Liam stuck his head out of the ditch. No shot. But he quickly ducked back down. He looked out again. This time a little longer to see what he could see, and he was knocked back by the force of another burning hot bullet in the shoulder. He laid at the bottom of the ditch. The blood was pouring out of two places. He became desperate. "Help! Help!" He yelled between moans of pain. The chances of anyone hearing him was about nil. He knew he would soon black out from blood loss if no one came to help. Why was he being attacked? There was no logic in it. He did not want to die. He retreated deeper into the ditch, trying to put pressure on the wound with his free hand.

A few minutes later he looked up and saw his assassin looking down at him from the road. Liam tried to point his pistol at him, but it was too late. The sniper had a rifle, but also carried a sidearm, which he used to execute Liam. The assassin then pulled the lifeless body out of the ditch and left it in the middle of the road.



Later that day, a farmhand was pulling a wagon down the road and saw the gruesome sight. He quickly ran to Crawfordton to report his finding.

The guard at the north end of Crawfordton, immediately sent the reporting farm hand to the main house, where Constable Jayden Phipps lived. Constable Jayden and his longtime friend, and founder of Crawfordton, Phil Crawford, decided to also involve Elijah Williams. Williams, who, like the other two men, were getting up in years. Elijah was specially sought out to check out the scene because of his past experience as a Detroit City Policeman.

Elijah functioned as the head of the local undercover military and criminal intelligence group. Also in the group was young Patrick Kelly and his wife, Bella, along with a thirtyish guy they just knew as La Rata. The intelligence group was headquartered in a typical looking farmhouse with a nearby shed that was owned by Rata. When they were not busy with a mission or investigation, they were out tending to the fields. The entire group walked out to the scene of the crime, which was less than a mile away. There were a couple of people from out of town who had passed by the crime scene and stopped to see what was going on.

"This is serious," Constable Jayden said. "This guy apparently killed a Postman. . . just to do it. The mail is still there."

Those who survived the violence in America after the collapse had seen more than their share of violent deaths and every other kind of death, but not murder that seemed totally random.

As they walked, Jayden kept looking at Phil. "Phil, you're not saying much."

Phil shook his head. "I. . .I've got a bad feeling. . ."

"Huh?" Jayden said.

Phil didn't speak.

The group got to the scene. There were a few onlookers standing around.

"God no," Phil said. Liam Thomas's mother requested years ago, that Phil mentor her young son. That was not long after Liam's father, who was unarmed and gunned down. Then his mother was raped. "Bless his heart," Phil said, sobbing. "That boy. . .man. . . was one of the kindest hearted men to walk the face of the earth. Heaven is a better place now."

Elijah became animated and told Bella, "Get everyone's name and address here. Find out if they know anything about this." Then Elijah shouted, "No one here touch *anything*! Don't step on any of these blood stains! And do not walk off of this road

onto the side! I will need footprints! Patrick, make sure that no one tampers with anything. I'll do all of the tampering."

"Got it," Patrick said.

"You're the man, Elijah," Jayden said. I've seen all I care to see here."

"That's cool." Elijah said, " Rata, the first thing we want to do is some blood splatter interpretation."

Rata had a blank look on his face. "Okay. . . the guy got shot."

"No, I mean *how* did he get shot. *Where* did the shot come from. That sort of thing."

Rata asked, "So how will that help anything?"

"We don't know yet. Liam got hit on the shoulder. . .and the leg."

"And that one," Rata said, looking at the cavity on his forehead.

"Yea; that one. We know that was the last shot. If it was the first shot the other two would not have been needed to kill him."

"It looks like he slid across the road, like he was crawling," Rata said.

"He wasn't crawling, because there are no breaks in the streak."

Rata asked, "You think he dove and slid out of the ditch?"

"Not that far with that leg messed up as bad as it is, plus his shoulder wound. For some reason he got drug out of the ditch." Elijah inspected the blood in the ditch. "The kill shot was right here." Elijah pointed to a place in the ditch. "He didn't do anything on his own after that. So what was the reason to pull him out of the ditch?"

Rata said, "The killer wanted everyone to see his remarkable achievement and contribution to mankind."

Elijah, surprised by the comment, said, "He pulled the body out of the ditch intentionally, because he wanted it to be found. He didn't take Liam's pistol. He didn't take the mail. It was terrorism, or some kind of psycho mailman hater."

"Terrorism?" Rata asked.

Elijah studied the road. He went back west ten feet. "Look, drops of blood. The vic. . . Liam, got shot farther south and was trying to get away. See the pattern? He pedaled a couple more times. Then he veered off into the ditch." Elijah went back to Liam's pistol. He smelled the pistol and took out the magazine. It's clear full. He even

charged it and reloaded it, giving him an extra round capacity. He never got off a shot in his own defense."

Phil overheard the comment. "I taught him that. I mean the extra round thing." Phil heaved a deep sigh and fought back the emotions. "I'm going to head back. I'll take care of telling his mom." Phil was at the age that he tired easily, so no one expected him to be very involved.

"Sorry, Phil," Rata said to Phil.

"Yea. Damn shame," Phil said. "Do your best Elijah. We gotta get to the bottom of this."

"We'll do our best, Phil. I promise," Elijah said.

"Bella!" Elijah said.

"Yea!" She said.

"Would you please go back to the shed and find that big magnet and bring it here?"

"K."

"Patrick!" Elijah shouted. "Can you go get a wheelbarrow or something and take the body to the Clinic? We need an autopsy."

Patrick looked less than enthused. "Okay."

Elijah said, "Then when you get back, go ahead and take him. I think I'm done with him. I'll go to the Clinic after I do some more here. Oh. . . and Patrick?"

"Yeah."

"Go ahead and drop off that bag of mail at our Post Office."

"Got it."

Elijah pointed at the wound on Liam's leg. "That first shot was on the south side of the road. It came from the southwest. Do me a favor, stay here and make sure no one follows me."

"No problem," Rata said.

"And make sure no one comes near that body." Elijah carefully looked at the ground each step he made as he slowly went into the tall grass. Elijah found some footprint sized, patches of bent over grass. He mentally drew an imaginary line from the body to the bent grass. He continued walking southwest in a straight line parallel to the assailant's path finding more footprints. The line led to a fencerow that had some

vine foliage growing on it. Elijah walked to the fence and looked over it. There was a flat spot of matted down grass. This was the spot where the shooter was laying prone, hiding and waiting to shoot. Elijah climbed over the four-foot tall fence and spent ten minutes inspecting the spot. He looked from the fence to where he believed the initial shot took place. The angle of the shot seemed to match the angle of the wound on Liam's leg.

"Rata!"

"Yea."

"Come here!"

Rata walked over to the fence.

"Climb over here."

Rata was far from athletic, but after some struggling and help from Elijah, the tortuous ordeal of crossing the fence was completed.

Elijah said, "When Bella gets back here with the magnet, stay here and look for spent cartridges. Don't quit until you find something."

"No problem."

"Make sure you go along the fencerow. The perp could have made the second shot over there farther." Elijah turned and looked back towards town. "Here's what really bugs me."

"What?" Rata responded.

"Look back this way. There are tracks. The shooter came from Crawfordton." Elijah groaned as he hopped back over the fence and walked back toward the body. He looked on the south side of the road again at another location and found another set of tracks going *back* to Crawfordton from the site of the assassin's position. So once again he struggled over the fence. "I'm too old for this."

Whoever shot Liam, came from Crawfordton, and went back to Crawfordton. Elijah took his time following the path made from the road, just in case the killer would happen to drop something or change directions. The path was not that difficult to follow as it went through some tall grass and weeds, which were clearly bent in the direction of the footsteps.

Once the path got to the north edge of Crawfordton, out by Fort Wilcox and Burkett's Market, the path could no longer be seen. The grass had too much foot travelling upon it to leave a single continuous distinct path.

Chapter 3

Mt. Sterling, Kentucky

Like the rest of the country, Mt. Sterling had seen its share of violence. But people managed to work together to subdue the chaos better than most areas of the former United States.

The Independent States of America could not coordinate national functions, or the Continental Army without being able to communicate across the States. Only top level officials had solar powered radio stations. Everyone else had to wait until mail day for the latest two-week old messages. So If the ISA would be without the mail, and did not have a functioning power grid, it was mostly in the dark.

Crawdad, the name that everyone knew the local Letter Carrier by, was proud of the red hat he wore. He felt important when the Postal customers trusted him with their oftentimes vital communications. Every time people were reunited because of the letters he carried, he didn't have to brag, he knew he was a hero.

After the collapse, many people were displaced and many others were missing. People were always looking for their friends and family members, so they tried to hunt them down via the mail. Money orders were sent by the mail along with all kinds of other business communications.

Crawdad stopped at one of the Post Offices in the Area for delivery and pickup. He said, "Looks like business has been good this week."

"Yea, not bad," the clerk said. "Believe it or not, there are actually some ads in that bundle."

"No way!" Crawdad chuckled.

"Yea, it don't take them long when there is a dollar to be. . ."

The clerk was hit in the chest by a bullet that came through the closed door to the old building. Crawdad immediately ducked and pulled his pistol as he crawled next to the wall to take cover. He crouched up and peered out the window and saw a sniper on top of the tallest building across the street. He reasoned that it was unlikely that the sniper saw him. It must have been a situation where the shooter just wanted to shoot inside and see what he could hit.

Crawdad found his way out the back door of the building that housed the Post Office. He ran halfway across the back of the buildings on the block. From there he went into the back door of an open building he knew to be unoccupied, and went through the building to the front door. Then he darted across the street. There was a bend in the street that would likely block the sniper's line of sight if he was still in the same position.

After he crossed the street, he continued through an alley to get to the back side of the buildings. Certainly that sniper would not have the nerve to escape out the front door.

He was unfamiliar with this part of town, but Crawdad finally located back door of the tall building he last saw the sniper on. He had never been in the building before, but he found the stairway that went all the way up. His heart raced. What if the sniper was watching him go up the stairs? What if the sniper was around the corner? He had never been in urban warfare or a manhunt before.

Crawdad never imagined he could be so scared. He went up another flight of stairs. Now he felt enveloped by a crushing sense of fear. He could barely lift his pistol as he started to believe he was walking towards his doom. The dark, creaky staircase smelled of mildew. Water had leaked into the building and was rotting parts of it. The floors creaked. Crawdad was uncertain if he would fall through the floor. He heard no other noises that would give away the assailant's location.

Finally Crawdad made it to the door leading out to the roof. It was cracked open. Crawdad feared the sniper might whip the door open at any moment. He stood there frozen, holding his pistol at the ready position. He could feel every heartbeat in his throat. His breathing was out of control. He wondered if this would be his last day on earth.

Crawdad kicked open the door and fell to a prone position on the steps. There was too much adrenalin flowing to feel the pain caused by the sharp thud on his forearms.

With his gun continually ready, Crawdad got back up and jumped out of the doorway and crouched down. He quickly looked around on the roof. There was still no one. But it was too soon to let down his guard. He looked all over the roof. The roof was at a higher level than the neighboring buildings. That sniper could not have made a jump like that, from the roof down to another building. At least Crawdad wasn't going to do it. The shooter was gone.

Crawdad was so relieved that there was no gunfight. He was physically spent, and just wanted to collapse and catch his breath. Crawdad figured that he just took too long to get to the place from where the shot was taken.

Meanwhile, the clerk was bleeding and there was a small chance that he might still be alive, so Crowdad had to stop the search and go back and try to save him now.

Chapter 4

Crawfordton, Ohio

After a thorough investigation, Elijah eventually made his way to the Crawfordton Clinic. Patrick was outside of the Clinic with Liam's body in the wheelbarrow. People were passing by, looking at Liam's body in horror.

"What's going on?" Elijah asked.

"I haven't been here too long. I was hoping you would come by. They won't let me in," Patrick said.

"No! We need this autopsy done! That's all there is to it!" Elijah stormed into the Clinic. "We can't keep him out here! This is ridiculous!"

Elijah's wife, Dr. Aliyah Williams was inside with Dr. Tammy White. Both of the doctors were experienced nurses in the pre-collapse and were more than able to function as doctors during the post-collapse. So they were commonly thought of, and referred to, as "doctors".

The Doctors' junior partner, Mitch Braun, was much younger, still in the very long process of learning the profession. Mitch also used his creativity to help innovate methods that utilized the limited resources, and spotty technology of the day.

"Hey!" Elijah said to Aliyah. "I need this body looked at! Right now!"

Tammy and Mitch were wide-eyed, bracing themselves, for the looming conflict.

Aliyah said, "Excuse me?!" She had "that look", that Elijah saw whenever he had taken a wrong turn with his words. "Are you serious?! You certainly do not know what you are asking! We spend *so* much time trying to keep this place as clean as we can. But, oh no! None of you think we do much, but here we are, having to constantly be scrubbing. . . We don't have modern disinfectants here. . ."

"Aliyah. . . I know, I. . ."

"Hush!" She said, "That man out there wheels this poor boy's God awful looking body in here, with a damn dirty wheelbarrow! Drippin' blood and . . . Hi head. Are you serious? It is not even covered up, for God's sake. It is too nasty for me to even talk about it! Imagine the bacteria all over all that! Do you realize that someone could die? Who told him to bring him here like that?!"

"Well, I . . .Me." Elijah knew that Aliyah already knew that.

"You know what? You and all of your little detectives can just come in here tonight and clean."

" But, 'Liyah, we're . . ."

"Uh huh. What? Too busy? No problem. You can come in here at dawn tomorrow and start. You already know what needs to be done. It better be done."

"Okay, okay," Elijah said, knowing that he would definitely be cleaning the Clinic now. "I understand. But we need. . .we request; that you do an autopsy on the body."

Dr. Aliyah said in a different tone, "Baby, looking at all that mess makes me and Tammy sick. It would be different if we were getting sick while we were saving someone's life. Can we have Mitch work on him?"

Everyone looked at Mitch, who's eyebrows were raised and his eyes opened wide. Then his head dropped. He sighed. "Okay. Elijah, what do you need me to do?"

Aliyah spoke up, "You're not carving up Liam outside of here either. It already looks really bad, like we are running some kind of butcher shop up in here."

Elijah, Mitch and Aliyah went outside with Patrick.

Elijah asked, "Mitch, can you come to the farm with us and work on him? I need those bullets. I don't want the bullets in his leg or shoulder scratched up. I don't want you to touch them with a metal instrument. It is going to be difficult enough to read without some added scratches."

"Okay," Mitch said, wincing and swallowing hard. "No problem."

Elijah said, "And if you could, I would like to know where the bullet ended up in the body compared to where it went in. You, know, the angle of entry. Don't worry about the head wound. There's an exit wound. . . maybe you could already tell."

Dr. Aliyah said shaking her head, "He's dead, 'Lijah. Is any of that going to help anything?"

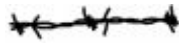
"Maybe. Can you please do it?" he asked Mitch.

Mitch said, "Yea. I got this. I'll get him over there right now."

"Thank you," Elijah said, thinking he wanted no part of fishing out the lead from among the human flesh. "We really appreciate it."

A young couple walked by. The woman put her hand over her mouth.

"Nothing to see here," Patrick said.



Meanwhile, back at the scene of the shooting, La Rata was still poking around in the dirt looking for a spent cartridge. Bella Kelly was helping, using the magnet from the farm.

Off to the west they heard a loud engine. A motorcycle. Motorcycles were usually not good news, but encounters with entire motorcycle gangs was a rare occurrence.

"At least it's only one," Rata said.

"Should we get out of here?" Bella asked.

"Naw. I still gotta find a cartridge. Gimme the magnet. You go."

"You sure?"

"Yea. Go."

"Okay. See ya later."

"See ya." Rata chose not to hide. If he was seen trying to hide, he would look much more suspicious.

When the motorcycle got closer, Rata could see that the rider was dressed in a long black leather coat. He wore an incongruous red baseball style cap, backwards style. The rider slowed down after he saw the letter carrier's blood on the road. The rider saw Rata, then he stopped the motorcycle and put up the kickstand, all the while staring at Rata. He pulled a shotgun out of a custom holster that was mounted to the motorcycle. He pumped it and started walking towards Rata. He didn't look much taller standing than when he sat on the motorcycle.

"Hey! You!" the motorcycle rider said. "You know anything about this?"

"Maybe," Rata said. "Who wants to know?"

"Look Pal, I'm a Postal Inspector, and I'm not in any kind of mood for any of your nonsense."

"Really?" Rata asked rhetorically. "You think a murder investigation is nonsense?"

The postal inspector started stepping toward Rata and pointed at the large dry blood smear. "So this guy was a letter carrier?"

"Yes."

"And now he is dead?"

"Very."

"Damn it all! Every time this happens, we have clowns like you messing around with all of the evidence!"

"Who you callin' 'clown', clown? Go ahead and start hitting your head on the road now, and I will be with you in a couple of minutes."

"Look, goof! Where is the damn body?!"

"Why don't you just go into the town there, and ask, shorty?"

"Who you callin' short?"

"You, goof."

The Postal Inspector got ever closer to Rata. They started sizing each other up. To the surprise of both of them, there was no discernable difference in their height. At that point, the staring contest ended abruptly.

Rata said, "Another thing, Shaquille, we are not *'messaging around with the evidence'*. We know what the hell we are doing."

"I'll be the judge of that." He had no idea what a "Shaquille" was, but he deduced that it probably meant "short". "What's your name, anyhow?"

"Just call me 'Rata'. Everyone else does."

"I can see why."

"Really? I don't get it. Like I said, Inspector Gadget, they are in town. At the Clinic."

"The name is Lynch. Inspector Lynch."

"Okay, Lynch."

It wasn't too long after Inspector Lynch rode off on his bike that Rata finally heard a little "click" as a spent cartridge hopped up to the magnet. He smiled wide. He turned over the magnet, and there it was. "Clown my ass, bitch."

Chapter 5

Eastern Lake Erie, Canadian Waters

Lake Erie was owned by Canada on the north side and south side was split by Homeland, on the southeast, and the ISA on the southwest. Separating Lake Erie and Lake Ontario was the Welland Locks, which was exclusively inside Canada. Canada had no treaty with Homeland or the ISA that gave their commercial freighters passage through the locks. About the only thing that Canada would let through the locks was ISA Iron from Minnesota.

Canada did not permit either the ISA or Homeland to bring their naval vessels into Canadian waters, which was the only way to get from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. The small ISA Navy consisted of boats that had never been up the St. Lawrence Seaway and into the ocean. Likewise, Homeland's Navy did not go into Lake Erie. There was little reason for Homeland to send a warship into Lake Erie anyway, other than to cause a provocation with the ISA.

Both sides did whatever Canada wanted, because Canada held all the cards. Both sides wanted to have normalized relations with Canada, and were hoping to get some of the abundant Canadian electrical power. This hope was an urgent one, because If one side of the rivalry got electrical power, they would gain a major economic advantage over the other.

The Canadians and the Homelanders knew that the small, fast, twenty foot boat, *Compassion*, was an ISA spy craft. And the ISA knew that they knew it, but that they would not act as if they knew it. So the *Compassion* could be seen every day in Canadian waters. The *Compassion*, with a plain clothes crew of four, was on constant picket duty, keeping an eye on anything coming out of the Welland Locks from Lake Ontario. There was always someone on the *Compassion* who had the boring task of watching the lock, day and night.

There was almost always a strong breeze. This caused the relatively shallow Lake Erie to have choppy waters. Rough waves slapped up against the *Compassion*. Being a smaller craft, it bounced, often and severely. Even the most lake worthy mariners' heads would spin over the constant day and night rocking motion.

The best plan to deal with the sea sickness was to eat and drink as little as possible. Chances are you could end up heaving it over into the murky waters. The situation was more disturbing because the Lake smelled like it was teeming with microbial life forms that were not supposed to be there.

"Skipper!" the seaman shook Lieutenant Eisenberg, who was taking an early morning nap.

"Whaddaya want, Nelson?" The skipper barely cracked open his eyes seeing the always packed and cluttered hull, and also the face of the alarmed Seaman, Nelson.

"Sir, something. . .interesting is coming, this way out of the lock."

Eisenberg's eyes opened wide. "How interesting?"

Nelson said, "Big interesting."

Eisenberg got up from the cheap cot and tried to straighten his aching back and squinting his eyes as he went up to the deck. The other two seamen were waiting for Eisenberg to come take a look.

Nelson handed him the binoculars. "Look at it sir. It looks like it has a low draft, because it has a very heavy load."

Eisenberg saw the ship that seemed to be intentionally coming towards them. Because of the distance and profile, not much could be determined about the ship, except that it was large, and not a freighter. "Yea. It seems to be sitting low, but not because of freight, it's because of armor. Did you see any guns on it?"

"It's hard to tell at this angle."

"They are coming this way, so we should sit tight."

The Engineer asked, "Sir, should we at least start the engine?"

"Maybe you better. Aye, start it."

The Engineer went below, followed by a seaman.

The Lieutenant said, "Get down Nelson, so we don't look so conspicuous."

Nelson squatted down, continuing what all the involved parties knew to be a ruse.

They waited and watched a few minutes.

Nelson said, "Sir, I think they are bearing down on us."

"Maybe. Hey! How 'bout that engine!?" The engine still had not started.

They could hear the engine sputtering.

"Damn gas," Nelson said.

Eisenberg said, "That's our new and improved Texas gas, you know."

The engine continued to wheeze and sputter, but would not start. The ship continued to head straight at them only being a few hundred yards away.

Nelson asked, "Should I get on the radio, sir?"

"Aye! Give them a report! Right now! Those bastards are going to ram us!"

The engine sputtered and started up.

The Engineer came up the ladder from the hold to the deck, yelling to whoever would listen up above, "Put that sonofabitch in gear!" he yelled, but instead, he thought it to be more prudent to rush up and take the helm.

The ship was close enough to them that they could see their faces. It did not have a high profile, but they were still looking down several feet at them. Some of the crew members were smugly looking down at them. One of them was also giving them the finger.

Eisenberg was listening to Nelson on the radio, he turned and ordered the Engineer, "Hard starboard!"

A head on collision was avoided, but the tiny ship was tossed, and almost capsized, as the port side took a glancing blow into its fiberglass side from the unyielding steel hull of the ramming hulk.

It seemed like the massive ship was never going to finish passing them. It was as big as the *ISS Green Bay*, the flagship of the Independent States Great Lakes Fleet.

A cry from below came, "Sir! We're taking in water!"

Then, to add insult to injury, the *Compassion* was tossed around a bit more as the wake of the large ship slapped it.

The Skipper set the course for the Sandusky Bay Naval Station. Then Eisenberg yelled, "Nelson! Make a distress Call! Then bucket brigade! Now!"



The radio operator of the *ISS LeHew* held the earpiece close to his head with his hand while trying to tune in the frequency. "Sir! Incoming distress transmission from the *Compassion*!" he told Lt. Kirkendahl and Capt. Bernard. "Go ahead for the *LeHew*." They quietly stared at the operator, who was clearly struggling to hear what was being said. "The *Compassion* was rammed by a large warship entering the Lake from the locks. They are taking in water."

Captain Bernard told Lt. Kirkendahl, "Set course for Welland, full speed. Seaman, radio the *Green Bay*. Possible Homeland incursion."

"Aye, Captain."

Chapter 6

Crawfordton, Ohio

It was a short ride to town from the highway. "My name is Inspector Lynch," he said to the sentry at the edge of town.

"Inspector?"

"Yeah. Postal Inspector."

"Okay," the sentry said. "We don't really stop anyone from entering. We're a free town. Unless you have a hex tattoo on your face, or something like that."

"You mind if I leave my bike and shotgun here with you?"

"Plenty of room for that. They'll be safe here."

"Can you point out the Clinic?"

The sentry pointed directly at the nearby house that housed the Crawfordton Clinic.

Ty thought that Crawfordton looked like every other post-apocalyptic town in Ohio for the most part. Before the collapse, it was a quiet residential housing development. Now, many of the roofs had some kind of a tarp covering the old irreplaceable shingles, being held down by bricks. Others had sod packed on top. Abandoned vehicles here and there, some used for homes, others for storage.

Crawfordton was quite a bit more shot up than the norm. But the other sights and smells of the town were pretty normal.

Dr. Tammy White could hear the clomping sound of some heavy boots on the porch outside of the makeshift Clinic's door. She anticipated, from the heavy impact of the noise, an imposing figure to darken the doorway as it opened. Instead, she saw a short, sturdy man with a long black coat.

"Doctor?" The man said, impulsively giving the fortyish woman, who was less emaciated than normal, the elevator eyes.

"Yes. Doctor White," she said, folding her arms. "May I help you?"

"My name is Ty Lynch. I am a Postal Inspector." Ty took off his red cap.

"Umm. . .Dr. Williams isn't here right now. You probably want to talk to her," Tammy said.

Ty tried to preserve his dignity by focusing on Tammy's face. "Perhaps you can help me anyway."

"Maybe. I suspect you are here to investigate the murder of Liam Thomas, our mail deliveryman."

"Yes, Doctor. Can you tell me what has become of the body?"

"The body has been taken to the Farm."

"The Farm?"

"Yes. It's where they do the local investigations. It's kind of secret."

"They do investigations and autopsies here?"

"When necessary."

"Can you take me there?"

"No. But it's not that I wouldn't want to, it's just that I have to stay here right now; in case of an emergency. I really wouldn't mind, if you wanted to stay here for awhile until Dr. Williams gets back."

"Thank you Doctor. I think I'll do that."

"Just have a seat over there," Inspector.

"Thank you." Inspector Lynch watched Doctor White as she tended to wiping down some instruments, and looked over some paperwork. Tell me, Doctor, are you with anyone?"

Tammy was clearly taken aback by the forwardness. "No. I have never been married."

"Are you serious? I can't believe. . ."

"Inspector, I am not interested in being with anyone. I have my work now. It keeps me very busy and satisfied, you know?"

"No, I really don't know. You can work and have other interests."

"Well, not to be blunt, but I'm not really on the market. I don't want the complications. Seriously."

"I'm not going to lie to you Doctor. I think you are very beautiful."

Tammy's face turned red. She stopped and sighed. "Mr. Lynch, as nice as that is to hear, it is really out of the question."

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, Doctor."

"No problem. Just forget about it. I'm sure we can be good friends while you are in town."

"That would be great."

Soon Dr. Williams came through the door. "Hello there. What are we doing for you, now?"

"Oh, I'm not a patient. I am Postal Inspector Lynch. I just came here so Dr. White could take me to the Farm."

Tammy said, "Well, that's not exactly. . ."

"You two go right on ahead now and I'll take care of business," Aliyah said. "We really are not that busy right now, anyhow, you know."

"But I. . ." Tammy tried to interrupt.

"In fact," Aliyah said, "Just go ahead and take the rest of the afternoon off. Elijah is going to come back and do all of the cleaning anyway. We're getting a break from that. You can just help me inspect their shoddy work tomorrow when you get here."

Tammy said, "Why don't you go, then?"

"What?! That's crazy talk. Now go on!" Aliyah said.

"All right then," Tammy said. "I'll take you to the Farm, Inspector."

The Inspector held the door open and Tammy led the way. "Tammy, since you have the rest of the day off. . ."

Tammy said, "I know you are way too busy than to spend it looking at this wasteland of a town."

"Not at all."

"I have things to do, I'll be happy to drop you off at the Farm. They don't want too many people there anyhow."

"Sure Doctor, have it your way."

After Ty's abrupt acknowledgement, there was a frosty silence.

Unwilling to leave things between them as they were, Ty said, "What is it about this town? I mean, I know Fort Wilcox is here. But it seems. . . different somehow."

"Crawfordton has a colorful history. We have had a number of serious battles here. You could say this town is militaristic, I suppose. Of course, we are survivors. I suppose that is why our clinic has always been so vital."

The Inspector asked, "I guess I pretty much knew all that. Things here are, well. . .trashy, but things also seem organized."

"We try. Its 'trashy' as you say, because we have had a lot of collateral damage and there used to be lots more people living here. Some died, but most just moved on."

"Is there a pro-Homeland sentiment here?"

"None that I know of. That would be a good question to ask at the Farm."

"Any weirdoes?"

"Really? What town doesn't have that?"

"I'll grant you that."

As they got closer to the Farm, Ty said, "Tammy. Will you see me again?"

There a quite a few Christians here. Are you a Christian, Mr. Lynch?"

"I dunno. . . I guess. Is that your question you ask when you want to break off a conversation?"

"Is it too hard to understand that someone may care for your soul? If you are a real Christian, you would know it."

"Okay. Maybe by your standards, I'm not."

"I only use God's standards. No, I am not trying to chase you off with that question, but I. . . just have to ask."

Several people were standing outside of the farmhouse looking at Ty and Tammy from a distance. Ty saw them gawking.

"You are a lot younger than me," Tammy said. "And you don't know me at all."

"You're a gorgeous Doctor who has never been married."

Tammy said, "It's funny how some guys are so forward, and some wait, and wait." Tammy started sobbing. "Next thing you know. . . they are gone." She started whimpering and crying, then turned to walk away.

"Tammy."

Tammy held up her hand without turning around.

"Damn!"

"Hey!" a man's voice called out.

Ty recognized La Rata as the guy calling him.

Rata said, "What did you do to the Doctor?"

Ty walked toward the men.

Elijah said, "Inspector Lynch, looks like you are having a problem with one of the local women."

This was not the kind of entry into Crawfordton that Lynch had planned on. He imagined riding in on his bike, fully in charge of the situation and everyone involved with it. Then he would round up the culprit and take care of business.

Rata said, "Dude, you really chased her off quickly."

The Inspector said, "Can we just get down to business?"

Rata said, "Man, you are really good at pissing people off for no reason."

"Yea, well never mind that!" Ty walked closer. "Where's the body?!"

Elijah said, "What did you say to her?"

"Hell, I don't know! Can was please just drop it? I really don't know what set her off."

Elijah said, "At least you have good taste in women."

Rata said, "Yeah, and she must have good taste in men."

They all started laughing.

"All right, all right," Elijah said, "We've all been there. . ."

"Not me," La Rata said.

Mitch shrugged his shoulders. Bella shook her head at him.

Elijah said, "This is Patrick Kelly; his wife, Bella; and you know La Rata; and Dr. Mitch Braun. We are the intelligence group for Crawfordton."

They all gave the Inspector a hearty handshake.

"My name is Ty Lynch, ISA Postal Inspector."

"We appreciate your help."

"My help?"

"Sure," Elijah said. "If you would rather take over the investigation, we won't get in your way. Anyways; Inspector, please help us maintain secrecy about our Farm."

"Of course."

Elijah continued, "Mitch here worked on the body and recovered the bullets. One of them is good for matching. Would you like to examine the body?"

"Let's take a look," Lynch said.

Mitch said, "Maybe you won't want to look at it. Um, it's a little out of sorts."

Elijah looked at Mitch with some suspicion.

Mitch shook his head.

Ty said, "Where is it?"

Mitch pointed to the shed.

Ty walked over to the door and took one step in.

Mitch said, "I really don't recommend. . ."

Ty looked at the corpse. "Aw hell! Sonofa! . . ." He came back out, cringing. "Damn, what a mess! Remind me not to get my tonsils taken out here."

Mitch shrugged his shoulders. "Elijah, can you please see if Phil can tell Liam's Mom, that we will take care of the body ourselves? She will lose her mind if she sees him this way."

"Alright." Elijah told Ty, "In spite of all that, he did get a perfect bullet for matching, though."

Mitch said, "The bullet that hit the femur was pretty flattened out when it hit the bone, but the shoulder one was real good."

"Yea, okay," Lynch said. "That's very good." He started coughing like he was in the early stages of vomiting.

Rata said, "I found one of the empty cartridges. Right after you left."

Ty wiped his mouth and nodded.

Elijah said, "Funny thing is, that ammunition is a weird one. It measures just several hundredths bigger than 7.62mm. And the cartridge is a little bigger, unusual shape. If we find the gun, it will have to be unusual, but at the same time, we don't know what kind of gun we are looking for. I suppose some kind of old bolt action model."

Ty said, "You people have done a nice job here, I have to say. Usually when we show up, everything is messed up."

Rata said, "I told you we know what the hell we are doing."

"Okay, I get that now," Lynch said. "It is easy for anyone just to say, but you guys are doing pretty well so far, and I really appreciate everything you have done here. Any witnesses?"

Elijah said, "We don't think so."

Ty said, "So there is no weapon, and no witnesses. Not good. Did they leave the mail?"

Elijah said, "Patrick here took it down to our one-legged Postal Clerk."

"Good, good."

Elijah added, "If they wanted the carrier dead because they wanted some letter out of the pouch, then they would have taken the mail from the scene to be sorted later."

Lynch said, "It's not about robbing the mail."

Elijah said, "Well, if it is about some psycho who didn't get a Post Office job as an exemption from the draft. . ."

Lynch interrupted, "No, we know what it is."

The others just looked at Ty waiting for an explanation.

"Someone is killing our letter carriers across all of the Independent States. There are more murders going on right now than there are of us Postal Inspectors to go around. We think it is a terrorist campaign to degrade our communications infrastructure."

Rata said, "Dude, English *por favor*."

Ty said, "No one is going to want to be a letter carrier. I can't say as I blame them. And the mail won't go."

Mitch asked, "A terrorist campaign on letter carriers?"

Ty said, "Yes. So many underestimate the importance of what we do. There aren't many communication channels available right now. Without good communication across the country, the ISA will not be able to effectively defend itself from our many enemies. The mail is a lot more than someone looking for their family members. Some of it is military messages." Lynch asked the group, "What is it about you guys? How do you know this crime investigation stuff?"

One by one, they started pointing at Elijah.

Elijah said, "I am an ex-cop from Detroit. I specialized in gangs, so I saw a lot of homicides. Also, ex-Marine Corps. Iraq. These men with me are no lightweights; This is La Rata, he owns this farm."

"*And* . . ." Rata said.

"*And* . . .he was in one of the gangs."

"C'mon!" Rata said, "Really?! You didn't have to tell him that!"

Elijah said, "*And*, he is a badass superspy."

"That's better," Rata said.

Elijah continued, "We acquired, you might say, Patrick here from the military. He is brilliant and energetic. This is his wife, Bella. She is irreplaceable, so we brought her here. Dr. Mitch has spent his entire adult life learning medical, here, and in the Army. I daresay today was one of those learning experiences for him. We also have other very capable contacts in town and in the surrounding towns. All tried and proven. What about you, Lynch? What is your story?"

"Um. . .I never claimed to be brilliant, but I guess you could say I am tenacious. Like all of you, I have been through a lot. But I have to say, this situation of mailmen being killed. . .it's serious, and I am worried. We have to do everything imaginable to catch at least one of these bastards so we can figure out who is behind these killings. I have to say that maybe this case is the best hope for our country; Thanks to you people."

Elijah said, "I get it that this is important to the security of our Country. Can we all agree to work together to get to the bottom of it?"

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Elijah said, "Lynch, we can put you up at our house. It's crowded, but so is everywhere else in town."

"Thank you. I appreciate that. I'll probably have to run to the Station and report. Maybe tomorrow."

Elijah said, "Then the rest of us have an appointment at the Clinic."

"The Clinic?" Patrick asked.

Elijah said, "Did Aliyah say anything to you when you took the body to the Clinic?"

Patrick said, "Yea. You forget already? She was sorely pissed off. I never heard her talking like that."

"No, I know that. I mean, about cleaning."

"Huh?"

"We have to go over there and clean up the place," Elijah said.

"Hell no!" Rata said. "I ain't going! I'm too tired!"

Elijah said, "We all are. The sooner we all go over there and get this done, the sooner we can relax."

Rata sighed. "I can't do it all."

"Please," Elijah said. "I am asking for your help. You gotta help me make Aliyah happy."

"I'll go," Lynch said.

Rata said, "I don't know why you want to go, but your love interest probably won't be there."

"She might be," Dr. Mitch said. "I mean, she's not. . .I don't know."

Rata said, "Okay, I am definitely going. I gotta go check it out."

Chapter 7

Southeastern Lake Erie, Disputed Waters

"Vessel on our eleven," Lt. Kirkendahl said, holding the binoculars while looking out the makeshift conning tower windows of the ISS LeHew.

"Set path for intercept," Captain Bernard ordered.

"Twenty five degrees port," Kirkendahl said.

"Twenty five degrees port," the navigator repeated.

The Captain said, "She's about five miles out. Battle stations."

"Battle stations!" Kirkendahl ordered.

Another seaman rang a bell. Within seconds, a crew was seen taking up positions at their eight-inch fore deck gun.

As they closed the distance, Lt. Kirkendahl said, "Look at her draft, sir. She either doesn't have much of a hull. . ."

Bernard was worried, ". . .or has a lot of plate. We should shadow her until the fleet shows up."

Kirkendahl ordered, "Full stop."

"Full stop, sir."

Then Lieutenant Kirkendahl said, "Seaman. Any luck with the Green Bay?"

"Affirmative. They are on the way. ETA one hour."

The LeHew let their rival pass them at a distance. The LeHew got a full view of the profile of the ship. It was clearly a warship. The extent of the armament or armor was difficult to discern from the long distance encounter.

Kirkendahl said, "I suspect they are as much of a museum piece as we are."

"We can only hope," The Captain said. "I wouldn't want to be in the Compassion when that thing rammed it."

As the suspicious vessel passed by at a distance, they stopped and began to shadow the LeHew. Later, as the ISS flagship Green Bay and its flotilla approached, the intruder made a sharp turn for Canadian waters.

"Shall we follow sir?" Kirkendahl asked.

"Negative."

"But, those bastards. . ."

"I am well aware of what those bastards did, but we cannot risk upsetting our Canadian neighbors, as well as our Admiral."

"Aye, sir."

They watched the ship as it was almost out of their range of visibility. But then it stopped and turned revealing its broadside.

Captain Bernard said, "Those guys got a lot of nerve. Of course, they are ambiguously close to Canadian waters. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to move in a bit."

Kirkendahl order, "Half speed ahead."

"Half speed ahead."

They crept up closer to the stationary ship.

After what seemed like ten minutes, Cpt. Bernard ordered, "Full stop. We don't want to goad them."

"Full stop," Lt. Kirkendahl ordered.

"Full stop."

"Sir!"

The Captain asked, "What is it, Ensign?"

"Possible Homeland Flotilla on our ten."

Cpt. Bernard studied them. "They're massing at that location. Looks like we are going to have some kind of pissing match here."

"Pull back sir?" Lt. Kirkendahl asked.

"Negative. Stand fast. Let's not lose the battle before the first shot is fired."

"Battle, sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. This is a test of wills. Now is the time when you have to have confidence in your men's training. Are you going to give up on them knowing our fleet is on the way?"

"I didn't mean that, sir."

"I withdraw my statement, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir. If there is a battle, we will perform with distinction and honor."

Chapter 8

Crawfordton, Ohio

Telling Sophia Thomas her son was killed would be one of the worst things Phil Crawford would ever have to do in his long, difficult life. The half-destroyed Thomas house was just across Harris Road from the shot up Crawford house, but walking over the short distance was nearly twenty years full of memories. As distasteful as it was, the nasty task had to be done by someone. Phil didn't wish the chore on anyone else.

Phil was a thin man, as was nearly everyone else, but he had to wedge himself in through the collateral damage to get to her so called "front door".

Phil made a fist and rapped on her door. "Sophia".

She came to the door. Even at her age she was still one of the most beautiful women in Crawfordton. Even with the dark circles around her eyes. She had earned the right to have them. "Hi Phil."

"Sophia; I got some bad news for you."

Her heart immediately sank. About the only bad news people who were without anything could get was a report of the death of a family member. "Hunter?" she asked. Her oldest son was in the latter stages of his mandatory five year military service.

"No Sophia. . .Liam."

She looked into Phil's eyes, as if to wish that it was some kind of mistake. "Are you sure about this?"

"Positive." Phil patted her on the back.

"How is that even possible? What. . ."

"Sophia, he was killed on the job."

"He got hit by a car?"

Phil heaved a deep breath and shook his head.

"Someone shot my Liam on the road?"

"I'm afraid so. . .I know, it's pretty low. We are so sorry, Sophia."

She hid her grieving face from Phil, and put her hand on his arm, sobbing, trying to catch her breath."

Phil said, "Amy is going to bring you some lunch after 'while. She figured you would want to be alone. But you come over any time you want, okay?"

Sophia nodded her head. "You know, Phil, Hunter is going to come home and kill Skeet Morris."

"Now Sophia, I didn't show the boys how to shoot so they could rampage against whoever they suspected, not that the world wouldn't be a better place without Skeet."

Sophia said, "I know Skeet had something to do with it. He always had something against my Liam."

"Sophia, you don't know any such thing. There is a serious investigation going on right now, just wait until something turns up, okay?"

"I'm not promising anything to anyone anymore. I've had it. I may go over there and shoot the son of a bitch myself, along with that whole damn family of sick puppies."

"Alright Sophia, you're just mad now. You gotta rest up, okay?"

She nodded her head. "I am going to depend on you, Phil, but I'm telling you, I will be satisfied."

Phil remained awkwardly silent.

Sophia said, "Where's Liam now?"

"Sophia."

"I want to see him."

"No," Phil said, "I'm not going to let you see him."

"Damn it Phil! What the hell did they do to him!"

"No, it's just that the investigators are taking this case very seriously and they did an autopsy on him."

"Shouldn't someone have asked me first?"

"I apologize for that." Phil thought this conversation was far worse than his lowest expectation.

Sophia shook her head. "Phil, I gotta let you go. I'm not mad at you."

"Sorry," Phil said with his head hanging. "Your son was a good man, Sophia."



The investigation team slept very little, and the next morning they assembled at the kitchen table of the farmhouse.

Ty was rubbing his face, trying to wake up. "Where do we go from here?"

Elijah said, "We have the weapon's ballistic signature. We know that it is some kind of oddball rifle. Because of the large, unusual size, almost assuredly a bolt action of some type. We know that the perp went south after the crime, back towards town. We don't know if they kept going through town. That is possible, if they are a terrorist and they are trying to sneak back to Homeland. But more likely, they could still be in town, waiting until their next orders."

Patrick asked, "Why would someone want to help Homeland?"

Ty said, "I guess the reason why is not so important, at least not right now, since we know they are doing it throughout the ISA."

Patrick said, "If this terrorism is all over, we can rule out the local clans."

"Correct," Ty said.

Patrick said, "Maybe we should inspect everyone's gun."

Elijah said, "That does not go over so well in these parts."

Ty said, "No. I got it. We hunt all over the ISA if we have to, until we can find some of that same ammunition. Then we have them stock it in Burkett's Market and see if anyone comes to buy it. By doing this we can I.D. what it is. Then maybe we can figure out what this rifle looks like."

Elijah looked at Ty and said, "That is a really great idea." Then he turned to Rata, "If anyone knows how to scavenge, it is you."

Rata shook his head. "Damn. I gotta go all over the place again? You're just bragging on me to get me to do something."

Patrick said, "Is it possible that I detect some modesty? At least your version of it?"

Rata said, "I am the most modest guy you will ever meet."

"There it is," Patrick said, "bragging on the modesty."

"Wuh?" Rata turned the palms of his hands upwards.

Elijah said, "So do we want to send Rata on this mission? He may be gone quite awhile, given the rarity of this cartridge. There is no guarantee it will ever be purchased."

Ty said, "I think it would. Ammunition for an irregular sized gun is like gold. People are always on the lookout for it. "

Rata said, "Honestly, I got no better ideas. But I can't do it."

Elijah said, "Huh?"

Rata said, "The best place to check is Ottawa." Rata was referring to Ottawa, Indiana, home of one of their clan enemies, the Gofinns. "But I can't go there."

Ty asked, "Why not?"

"They know me."

Patrick said, "Well, if we can't go searching people's guns, and Rata can't go. Sending me appears to be the best of our terrible options."

Bella, who was sitting next to Patrick, squeezed his arm. She kept silent because she knew that if she intervened on Patrick's behalf, she would jeopardize her place as a team member and go back to cooking and cleaning.

Elijah told Patrick, "Yea, I'd have to agree. On your way to Indiana, stop at Delburg and let Rocky know. Our perp may have kept going through town and went over to Delburg."

"Delburg?" Ty asked.

Elijah said, "It's about five miles to the west. Rocky is our man there."

"Good," Ty said.

Patrick said, "I'll leave tonight. Travel in the dark."

Elijah nodded in agreement.

Lynch said, "Is it that bad in through there?"

"Very," Bella said, looking disturbed. She excused herself from the meeting.

Patrick looked at Ty and asked, "Inspector, what about protecting the letter carriers?" He glanced over and watched Bella leave the kitchen.

Ty said, "We can't begin to follow them all. Following them on their routes is impossible. They're extremely vulnerable. Any manpower you or anyone else has to

help patrol letter carrier routes might help keep the attackers in check. I plan on going over to Fort Wilcox today to get some help."

Elijah said, "You can ask, but they don't help much."

Inspector Lynch said, "You don't understand. I outrank him."

"No way!" Rata said.

"Way," Ty said. "Postal Inspectors are like a major in the ISA Army."

Elijah said, "You want to see Captain Durand."

Rata told Patrick, "Don't forget to take that cartridge I found. You got to talk to Orangutan."

"They call him that?" Patrick asked.

"Not really. I wouldn't. But he looks exactly like one."

"Good to know."

Chapter 9

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

"This is the most important meeting of our lives," Independent States of America, Envoy to Canada, Marcus Dull said to his Attaché, Clarence Harmon.

Minister Dull stared out the window of his modern, electrified luxury apartment in downtown Ottawa. Canada was largely spared from the ravages of the financial collapse and the catastrophe that followed. They had ongoing problems, but no total collapse. When they saw what happened to the US, they took measures to strengthen the Canadian Dollar. First by using Dollars to buy precious metals, then by eliminating their national deficit. Yet the current Prime Minister continues to buy votes by offering goodies the government does not have the money for. Many in Canada argue that Canada will eventually reap the same catastrophic reward as their southern neighbors.

Traffic was streaming both ways on the street. Some undocumented American refugees were huddled across the street, looking for work. It was a common sight in Canada, especially in the urban areas.

Marcus Dull said, "I have to say, I have never felt less confident about this meeting."

"Today we will make history," Harmon said. "Things will start turning for the better. . .they have to."

"I wish you were right." Dull shook his head. "I hope that what transpires here is not our nation's downfall. It is hard to prepare for something, when we really don't have any bargaining chips to put into play."

Harmon became impatient. "Your Excellency, we have one of the most productive belts of farmland in the world. We have to bargain as if they are the needy ones. They do need some food relief, with all of the refugees that have come here."

"Oh you're right, Harmon. No worries. You know it's different here, having to watch a clock. I haven't had to do that in many years."

Harmon chuckled, "We better get going, we don't have *that* good of a bargaining position."

"True."

The men went down to the ground floor of the hotel and started their hike on Sussex Drive to the Lester B. Pearson Building, home of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development.

On the way there, there was a loud popping sound, about four or five times. Startled, Clarence Harmon looked toward the noise and saw a car speeding away. He looked to his side and saw Envoy Dull laying on the sidewalk, covered in his own blood.

"No!" Harmon crouched down. "Marcus!"

Marcus said, holding one of his chest bullet wounds. "Harmon. . . go to the meeting."

"But Marcus!"

"Do it. That's an. . ." With that command, Marcus Dull suddenly lost consciousness.

"Help! Somebody Help!"

A crowd of onlookers started to gather around. Soon sirens could be heard some distance away. Envoy Dull did not look good. He was totally unresponsive. The sirens got closer to the scene of the shooting.

The police tried to get a report out of Harmon, but he couldn't speak. Marcus Dull was loaded onto the gurney and into the ambulance. The sheet was drawn up over his head.

The young policewoman told Harmon. "Sorry about your friend there. You gonna be okay?"

"Uh. . .would you please give me a ride to 122 Sussex."

"Foreign Affairs, Eh?"

"Yes please."

"Hop in."



The police cruiser dropped Harmon off at the massive modern building. He was in a daze.

"Mr. Harmon?" The police officer said.

Harmon turned around to look at the Police.

"We will wait here for you sir."

Clarence nodded. He looked at his suit coat and saw blood splattered all over his right arm. For the good of his country, he took off the coat and threw it behind a neatly trimmed bush.

He walked into the expansive lobby and was greeted by a team of security guards. Also, a well dressed man in a shirt white enough to put your eyes out. "Welcome, sir. You are. . .Mr. Harmon?"

"Um. . . I'm uh. . .yes, I am the Chargé d'Affaires for the ISA at the moment."

"We were expecting Mr. Dull."

"Yes. I know. Marcus Dull won't be coming."

"No?"

"No. He was assassinated on the way here about a half an hour ago, I guess." He glanced up at a clock on the wall. He was almost an hour late.

"I. . .I don't know what to say. We heard a lot of sirens."

Harmon held up his hand. "I know. I know. You don't have to say anything. Let's just go ahead with our meeting."

"Are you sure?"

Harmon took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Okay, then. I will take you up to see the Foreign Minister."

"Yes. Please. Lead the way."

It was a long walk through the ultra-modern building. All Harmon could think about was his own Country turning into nothing more than a weak third-world faction to be gobbled up by one of its ravenous neighbors.

They went through some double doors to a desk at the back of a long room. The room was colorfully appointed. Pictures of Canadians hand shaking various leaders, and cultural gifts were hung everywhere. The floor, walls, everything shined. At the far side of the room was an occupied desk. Sitting off to the side was another uniformed security officer.

"Mr. Harmon is here to see the Foreign Minister."

The receptionist picked up the phone and punched some numbers. "Minister Youngblood, Mr. Harmon is here now."

Harmon could not believe that the luxuriously appointed room was merely the receptionist's office. Then they went back to the Foreign Minister's Office. It was huge, with a massive oval meeting table. A couple of plush couches. A large library and several monitors displaying news.

Minister Youngblood was standing and watching a news channel, "I am so sorry, Harmon. I cannot believe anyone would do such a thing."

"Thank you, Sir."

"I will reschedule if you want."

"No sir. As bad as the tragedy is, we want to move forward with our relations. I hope you will see how serious we take this."

Youngblood said, "Please have a seat." They sat in the area with the couches. "Mr. Harmon, we have tried to keep an even hand with the Independent States and the Homeland, trying not to exacerbate the tension between the two. But the Prime Minister believes that now is the time for all of us to start moving ahead economically. It is for the good of the entire region."

Harmon said, "I can appreciate that sentiment. That is a motivation that we genuinely share. But our security takes precedence over all other considerations. We can ill afford to have Homeland outpace us in economic development. So, we must know if you intend to make a deal with Homeland for the sale of electricity."

"Mr. Harmon, things have been fairly stable for a long time. It is time to move on. Please have an open mind about this. It has come to the point that it seems a little petty."

"We reject any notion that Homeland will not exploit any advantage that they gain over us. Will Canada be making the same deal with us?"

"Unfortunately, due to logistics and supplies, that will not be possible."

Harmon took a deep breath and said, "You know, Minister, if they get electricity, the first thing they will do is start gearing up their military for an attack on us."

"The Prime Minister does not really see it that way. You have to have faith in the peace process. Homeland will also feel they are more secure, so be less likely to fear the ISA, which we find to be reasonable."

"Your Excellency, we find the passage of Homeland warships through the Welland Locks both provocative and disturbing."

Youngblood said, "It's only natural for Homeland to want to do what is in their own self interest. They have coastline within Lake Erie as well."

"Can we get a commitment from Canada that you will come to our aid in the event of a Homeland invasion?"

"We are convinced that that is never going to happen. In fact, the Prime Minister thinks it more likely that Homeland will want to unify with Canada."

"Homeland become part of Canada?"

"Yes. Frankly, I am surprised that you find that unexpected. We believe they are a good fit for joining Canada. They don't have some of the. . . Oh, I don't know, some of the preoccupations that the ISA and the Texas Republic have, for example."

Harmon said, "What you are saying is, that the liberal Prime Minister of Canada, wants to make Canada solidly liberal by absorbing a big liberal American region. And he hates gun owning Americans, like the good people of the ISA, who cling to conservative values."

"That is your words, not mine, or the Prime Minister's, sir. Listen, I know you have had a very trying day. . ."

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Fine then, Mr. Harmon. Let me say that we have a problem with certain little factions from the ISA who are helping separatists in the Canadian prairie provinces."

Harmon remarked, "Your disenfranchised provinces have nothing to do with the ISA. We have no designs on anything Canadian, except for your friendship and trade and maybe protection. There is no activity sponsored by us with your disenfranchised citizens there."

"I only bring up the prairie provinces because we are interested in the best possible relations between our two nations. That. . . activity is becoming more than just a mere distraction."

Harmon said, "Since we are being totally open here, did you know that someone is trying to destabilize the ISA by murdering our postal workers?"

"No, I did not hear anything about that."

"It was not covered on your news?"

"We get very little information from the south of the border. It is basically off limits to a lot of reporters since it is so chaotic."

Harmon said, "They are indeed trying to destroy our barely functioning communication infrastructure. It doesn't take a quantum physicist to deduce that

Homeland is still waging some kind of war on us. We have not done anything to provoke them. Now we find that you want to reward them as model citizens by selling them power. In turn, they will get back on their feet and invade us."

"Again, Mr. Harmon, we don't see it that way. Your worries are not warranted."

Harmon sighed. "We are against any sale of electricity to Homeland, unless we get the same deal. That is our position. And I must say it is inflexible."

"I understand, but I think it is very unfortunate. You know that is impossible. There is only so much to go around, and the delivery logistics just doesn't work out well."

"We are not going to table the issue of Homeland aggression towards us. If they are as honorable as you think, then you should have no problem issuing a statement in support of us in the event of an invasion."

"Not while the ISA is provoking them."

"I must caution the Foreign Minister not to get too close to Homeland. They cannot be trusted. You will not want to share in their shame when all of their deeds are revealed."

"If you can get some evidence to support that bold claim, I would be interested in hearing it. Thank you for meeting with me, and my condolences to you and the ISA for your loss."

"Thank you, sir. But we have been losing, every day for a long time. Those of us who remain, do not wilt from any hardship."

"Very admirable, Harmon."

Clarence said, "Someone killed Envoy Dull. I request that you give me some police protection while I am here."

"Certainly. I'll make a call."

Chapter 10

Crawfordton, Ohio

At sundown Patrick said his goodbyes to Bella, who was intensely nervous about his trip to Ottawa, Indiana. Patrick travelled very light. He took his semi-automatic .45, some silver cash, a canteen with water and some dried apples.

The first leg of the journey was a five mile hike to get to Delburg. Patrick found Rocky at his spacious home in Delburg.

Rocky, an alias, had previously been a well paid spy for Crawfordton back when they were in a cold war with the nearby town of Delburg. Once the war turned hot, the Gofinn regime headquartered in Ottawa, Indiana, was ousted and Rocky became the constable of the town.

"Well if it isn't Mr. Patrick Kelly," Rocky said. "Nice to see you."

"Likewise," Patrick said.

"Don't tell me you walked all this way just to see what a nice town looks like?"

"Yes, in fact I did."

"You liar."

"Dang. You caught me already. No, we are investigating a murder. Our local Postal Carrier was gunned down."

"No, really?"

"Cold blood."

"That's terrible. What happened?"

Elijah and the Postal Inspector, Inspector Lynch, say that our postman's death was part of a large terror campaign across the country."

Rocky shook his head. "It sounds like we need to attack Homeland, or whoever."

"That's just it. We don't know who it is." Patrick showed Rocky the cartridge. "The perp used this."

"Perp? You mean perpetrator?"

"Yea, that's Elijahspeak. You know, Detroit cop talk."

Rocky was half listening while studying the empty cartridge. "Man, I do not know what this big honker is. But I'm no gun expert. Phil Crawford doesn't know?"

"Nope."

"I really don't even know who would know."

Patrick said, "I'm on my way to Ottawa."

Rocky's eyebrows raised. "Yea, they probably have someone over there. I would go with you, but. . ."

"Let me guess; They know you."

"Yea, actually they do." Both of the men remembered well the Gofinn occupation of Delburg, which lasted for years. The Gofinns capitol was in Ottawa, Indiana.

"They seem to know everyone around here. No one wants to go back there."

"Thanks for the information Patrick. You can stay here if you want."

"I want to go tonight. I don't like the west side of your neighborhood very much."

"Sometimes night is no good either, you know, because of their dogs. But it's better than it was, I think. Anyway, I'm not going to try to talk you out of it."



Ty Lynch awoke at the Miller House the next day, where Elijah and Aliyah Williams lived. The house was in a lot better condition than any of the other traditionally constructed houses in town. It had escaped being ground zero during the battles that took place in Crawfordton.

Lynch was groggy from such a long, overdue rest. He greeted Elijah, Dr. Aliyah, Little Mitchell, Dr. Mitch, Terri, and Katy. Ty rubbed his face. He said, "This is quite a diverse bunch here."

It was common for houses to be crowded, especially in an area where people had migrated to. There still were no new professionally built homes being built, so demand outweighed an inflexible demand for decent housing.

Aliyah said, "We're all a family here. Elijah and I adopted everyone else here." The comment brought smiles. "Except little Mitchell here is our twelve year old Grandson. Little Mitchell is named after Dr. Mitch, who saved his life."

Little Mitchell leaned up against Dr. Mitch, giving Ty a wary eye.

Aliyah continued, "Terri takes care of the house, and Katy is Dr. Mitch's sister. She works out in the fields. She's nineteen."

Everyone in the Independent States of America had empathy for anyone who was 19 years old. It meant that they would soon be off serving their mandatory five year military service.

Ty said, "I really appreciate the hospitality."

Terri said, "I got some soybean cakes ready for you, Mr. Lynch."

"Soybean cakes? Elijah and I have some work to do."

"Oh, you have to try these. It is a town favorite."

Everyone watched Ty as he tasted the soybean pancake. They were yet to see anyone not like them. "Terri, this is so incredibly good. Thank you."

Terri smiled back at him.

The others all smiled and laughed at Ty's change in attitude over the soybean cakes.

Ty and Elijah ate the soycakes with real maple syrup on them. They were also served a couple of chicken eggs on the side. Ty said, "This is so good, I could forget all about ice cream."

Aliyah said, "'Lijah. Did that man just say the I-word?"

"I swear it sounded like it. We don't use that kind of talk in this house, Mr. Lynch."

They all got a chuckle, except Little Mitchell who figured Ice Cream was really something vile that was not to be discussed.

Big Mitchell said, "I miss Doritos."

Katy said, "I kind of remember Doritos. It's some kind of chip, right?"

Big Mitchell said, "Yea, it's a triangular shaped corn chip with seasoning on it."

Little Mitchell said, "That sounds pretty weird. How can you chew it?" he went back to eating and stared at Ty. He asked, "Are you a policeman?"

"Yes. Kind'a," Lynch said.

Little Mitchell said, "We already have a lot of police here."

Aliyah said, "Eat, Mitchell. Mr. Lynch is a special policeman. He likes to ask a lot of questions."

Elijah said, "You ready Ty? We better get started."

Ty expressed his gratitude. As they left the house, Ty told Elijah, "I was thinking. The perpetrator might have tried to find out when the mail was going through, so he could lay in wait on Liam."

"Okay," Elijah said, "I already did talk to our postal clerk here."

"Naturally, but let's go back there."

"Sure. It's on the way to the farm."

"Will my bike be in your way?"

"No problem, man. You can leave it in the garage as long as you want."

"I really appreciate everything. Thank you."

Chapter 11

On the way to the Crawfordton Post Office, Ty spotted Dr. White on her way to the Clinic. Tammy noticed him gawking at her. He realized that he probably was creeping her out, but he couldn't bring himself to stop looking at her. Seeing her was like putting salve into sore, itchy eyes. It occurred to Ty that maybe he was indeed a creep. Oh well, just go with it. Ty was startled when Elijah started chuckling about Ty's tongue-dragging ogling.

The Crawfordton Post Office was in the back end of a rusted out van. All of the tires were flat and weeds were growing up all around it. There was a lean-to made of smaller logs and covered with sod. Their one-legged Postal Clerk had lived in the same spot for so many years.

The one-legged Postal Clerk on crutches saw Ty's red hat with the letters "P.I." written on it with a marker. The Postal Clerk saluted Ty. "Clerk Udelhoven, Sir."

"Udelhoven?" Ty saluted back.

"Yes sir."

"Udelhoven, first I want to commend you for all your years of service at this location. You have done a great service to our nation."

"Thank you sir."

"At ease. Udelhoven, you got a first name?"

"Yes Sir. Joe, sir."

"Joe, you can call me Ty, Okay?"

Joe said, "Yes sir, Joe. . .I mean, Ty."

Ty said, "Joe, right now we need you to be extra vigilant. Do you recall anyone asking about Liam Thomas's schedule, or when he would be coming to town next?"

"Everyone asks that. They always want to know when their mail will be coming and going. You'd think they would remember it after having the same routine for so long."

"Makes sense," Inspector Lynch said.

Joe said, "Any progress on catching the killer?"

Ty said, "Some. But we have a lot to do. We'll check back with you, Joe."

"All right Inspector."

After they left, Ty said, "I hope I didn't lie to him."

"You mean about checking back?"

"No, about making some progress on the case."

Elijah said, "We're doing all we can. I'll admit, cracking it seems like a long shot, but it is not totally stalled out yet."



Out in the woods in Indiana, Patrick got a couple hours of sleep, in between waking up and swatting mosquitoes, and worrying if someone with a bad attitude and a hunting dog was going to stumble upon him.

Patrick reflected on how many times in the past he had to run around in the woods chasing and being chased. He might have been better off in the long run if he would have just went into the military. He would have already completed his five years. Now he was going to be involved with this same type of activity for the foreseeable future. One day he may get caught during one of these high risk scenarios. Bella was getting tired of him putting his neck out there.

Patrick stood up and looked over the brush. The Goldfinch, or Gofinn Complex, as it was popularly called, was a surrealistic sight. And smell. While the information age in America had collapsed, things reverted all the way back to the iron age. Now, here in Ottawa, Indiana, they had advanced up to the industrial age, which was going full bore in all of its putrid glory. There was black foundry smoke and soot all over. It smelled like cancer, fire and brimstone, and death itself. Since the Gofinn technology was so advanced, many people from all over the area relocated to Ottawa for the dangerous foundry work and exceptionally high paying jobs. The foundry produced everything from steel hand tools to cannons. The main raw materials for producing their products came in trucks carrying coal and scrap steel. But the place was also a conglomerate of many other businesses. People were everywhere carrying on their repulsive commerce.

The housing, however was not good enough to properly earn the name "housing". Instead, the population lived in all types of hovels surrounding the fortified, well guarded industrial area. Those who were higher ranking within the oligarchy had the privilege of living inside the complex.

The filth of Ottawa was seen as a prestigious by-product of its prosperity, not a scourge on the downtrodden. Money was still pouring into the small city-state as the valuable products trickled out.

Goldfinch had always been at the forefront of reacquiring lost technology and industry. They were sometimes even able to recruit borderline crazy, or just plain greedy engineers from Canada.

During the previous decade, the Gofinns had tried to become an expansionist modern day Roman empire, but their legions of gangsters, clansmen, and robbers lacked the education and military discipline to succeed.

The ISA held no authority over the Gofinns. They were like a nation on a reservation. As long as they contributed and behaved themselves, the situation was mutually beneficial.

Large trucks of all types were lined up to go in and out of the complex, along with pack animals and individuals, like Patrick.

Waiting in line to get in seemed pointless. What were they talking about at the gate?

It was Patrick's turn to talk to the guard at the entrance. He said, "I need to see Orangutan."

"Who the hell is that?" the old guard asked.

"Ammo dealer."

The guard laughed. "Oh, that guy. Yea, that fits him. Go straight back and look for building 5 on the left. That is a merchant building. Oh. . .and I's supposed to let everyone know, who is going back there that we don't sell slaves."

"Useful information. Thanks."

Patrick walked back as instructed. He saw people carrying all types of things in and out to be traded. An old well pump, solar panels, a mirror, a wagon load of scrap metal being pulled by a mule, something not hid very well under a guy's long coat, A weird breed of chickens, a goat, and whatever else a post apocalyptic survivor would want.

Patrick went inside building 5. He wanted to cringe when he saw a man who had the whole side of his face disfigured. He asked the man, "Do you know where the ammunition trader is?"

He spoke as well as he could, given he had no control over half of his mouth. "In da ba oba dere, to da lef."

Patrick made his way to the back of the room, feeling confident. Certainly Rocky and Rata must have did something to cause their unwelcome status. He saw another unusual looking man. The sight of the man made him recall the moniker "Orangutan". The man was dark skinned, with a pug nose. He had a double chin and sparse red hair that was defying gravity, and a thin red beard that didn't stop at what must be his neck.

"Help you?" Orangutan said.

"Yea," Patrick fumbled around in his pants pocket for the cartridge. Got any of this size ammunition? He held it up.

"If it is what I think it is, I don't think so. Mind if I take a look?"

Patrick handed it over.

Orangutan studied it. He pulled out a caliper to measure the diameter. Then he walked back to take a look at his stock. "I'm all out."

Patrick said, "You had some recently?" Trying not to sound like an investigator, he did not want to come right out and ask what it was. He felt more comfortable playing the role of the gun owner.

"Yea, I had a box. A guy came in and took the whole thing. I had to charge him a lot for it. It would have been about as cheap for him to buy a different gun, and then still have the money to buy the ammunition. But that is what he wanted for some reason. You know, the customer is always right."

Patrick felt he had to press for some information. "I might want to get in touch with the guy to buy some of it. Can you tell me who it was?"

"We don't ask that. That is your business, not mine."

"Can you tell me what the guy looked like?"

"I can, but I won't. We don't play that way here. We stay out of personal stuff." He handed back the empty cartridge.

Patrick pulled out a silver dollar and carefully put it on the counter so it wouldn't make its distinctive ringing sound. "How many questions can I ask for this?"

"Several."

"What type of ammunition is this?"

"Arisaka seven point seven by fifty eight."

"Really?"

"Is 'really' one of your questions?"

"No."

"Tell me everything you can about the guy who bought the ammunition."

"White guy, about your size and height. Late twenties. Kind of a nervous squirrely acting guy."

"Anything different about him?"

Orangutan-man didn't like that question. "I don't know. The weird thing was that there *wasn't* anything different or weird about him. Look around, you see nothing *but* unusual types."

"I understand what you are saying, but I need more."

The ammo dealer shrugged his shoulders, "They guy was pretty bundled up. He did have a dark beard though."

"This time of year?"

"Yea. A little odd, I'd agree. That's why I mentioned it. Although I see that sometimes here."

"What exactly was he wearing?"

"Jeans; work boots; maybe blue hoodie. He could have changed his clothes by now."

"Yea, I get that. He buy anything else?"

"Some pistol cartridges. . .maybe some forty five caliber. I forget."

"You think he's an ammunition dealer?"

"No way. I have a lot better deals here that any dealer would want. He didn't know that much, I don't think."

"So you wouldn't expect him to be a great shot?"

"How the hell. . ."

"Guess."

"No."

"You going to get any more of that Arazaki in?"

"It's Arisaka, and I doubt it, but you never know."

"Can you hook me up if I pay triple?"

Orangutan sighed and looked around. "If you want it, come back in an hour."

"All right." Patrick realized that the Gofinns were strategically hoarding ammunition. The price could only go up as the supply gradually decreased. Less was being used than in recent years because people managed to get along better. But very little was being produced or imported. "I'll see you in an hour."

Patrick walked around with his head down for what seemed like an hour so no one would get the idea that he was either lurking or stalking anyone. He had a small pencil and some paper and recorded what Orangutan had told him.

He came back to the ammunition stand, and the dealer produced an entire box of Arisaka 7.7 mm X 58. "It's three silver dollars per cartridge."

"Holy crap." Patrick was digging around in his pocket. "I got five. . .six. . .seven dollars and sixty cents. Can I get 3 for that?"

"Deal. You know where it is, if you need more. Same price. No questions asked."

Sadly, this was the first time he had seen the Ammunition vendor smile. It's no wonder his face looked like he had been beaten up a lot. Patrick had the inexplicable urge to smash his face himself.

"All right." Patrick wished he could have had that whole box. What a carrot they could dangle in front of the Arisaka gun owner with an entire box. Oh well, maybe that would be too obvious. He stuck the cartridges into his pocket where the heavy silver coins had been. This made him feel poor. Probably the same feeling most people have when they are leaving this place. The first thing he would do when he got back was to get reimbursed for the purchase.

Patrick was eager to get back to Bella and the relative safety of Crawfordton, but he understood the importance of the mission, and wanted to make sure he got back with all of his inner workings intact, so he found a nice hiding place in the nearby brush to nap until nightfall.

Chapter 12

Crawfordton, Ohio

The following morning, Patrick made it to the farmhouse. On the return trip he bypassed Delburg. He was greeted at the edge of the farm with an eager embrace and kisses from his wife, Bella. Then the team assembled in the kitchen.

Patrick put his three cartridges on the kitchen table.

"Attaboy!" Ty said. "Good job."

Ty said, "Yea, it only cost me eight dollars and sixty cents if you include the dollar for information."

"Aiiiii!" Rata said, "That's a lot. That damn Orangutan. . ."

Patrick said, "I sure hope these were worth it."

"Well worth it," Elijah said. "We have to do everything we can to solve this case, for the sake of our Country. We couldn't be happier. We'll cover the cost. Give us a full report."

Patrick looked at his notebook and took a deep breath. "Alright. Those are Arisaka seven point seven by fifty eight cartridges. They have more but I didn't have the money. They are rare."

Elijah said, "We can have Phil Crawford look them up and tell us about the gun. Beautiful."

Patrick said, "There was a guy there who previously bought out their stock."

Rata said, "From Orangutan?"

"Yep. These three came at a steep premium from their private stock."

Ty said, "Tell me you asked about their buyer."

"Yep. That's where the extra dollar came in."

Rata said, "Yea, otherwise he wouldn't have said anything."

Patrick opened up his note pad. "Okay; my height, black hair, late twenties. Squirrely acting, nervous. Jeans, work boots, hoodie, maybe blue. Had a sidearm,

possibly forty five. Didn't seem to know much about what he was doing. Very unlikely to be an ammunition dealer, very likely not a good shot."

Ty asked, "Anyone with him?"

"Um. . .I didn't. . .I should have. . ."

"No, no. Not a problem," Inspector Lynch said, "You did great. Now we have to figure out what to do next. We don't really know if that guy is our man. But at least we have some more ammo to sell. All we can do is hope our guy is in the market for more."

"Patrick," Elijah said, "go on and get cleaned up and get some rest. I'm sure Bella will help you unwind. Good work, Kelly."

The couple left the kitchen for the outside wash tub behind the shed.

Elijah said, "The rest of us can go on over to the House to talk to Phil and Jayden."

When they got to the Crawford's home, otherwise known as the House. Ty found the history behind the house interesting. The now unused entrenchments and fortifications from desperate battles filled up the entire front yard. There were massive excavations and steel garbage cans filled with soil that they hoped would never have to be used again. The house itself had hundreds of patches in it. Mud, rocks or anything that would fit in a bullet hole, or 20mm cannon hole was stuffed in. The garage looked like it was ready to collapse, but Ty was told it had been leaning badly like that for a long time.

Inside the house, there were sandbags still there to stop bullets from shooters who thought they were likely hitting someone. The living space was much diminished in floor space size because of this.

Amy Crawford, Phil's wife, let them in and took them to the dining room. Amy went outside and called Phil and Constable Jayden Phipps in.

Elijah said, "Phil, this is an Arisaka seven point seven by fifty eight. You got a picture of the gun?"

"I should."

Phil came back with the thick book. He looked at the index in the back, then started looking for a certain page. "Arisaka is a collector rifle. It is the type 99 used by Japan in World War Two. They were made with a 16 petal chrysanthemum stamped on the receiver. Many of them had the stamping ground off."

Ty asked, "How can we look for that gun?"

Rata said, "Everyone around here carries their gun with them. We just keep quiet about it while we are looking."

Elijah said, "We could have some kind of festival. To get the people out and about."

Rata said, "How about a Mexican fiesta."

Elijah said, "That sounds nice. No thank you."

"That's offensive," Rata said. "Why?"

"You and Carlos are the only Mexicans around. Where is he anyhow."

Rata said, "What the hell? Just because I am a Mexican, I am supposed to know what every other Mexican is doing. That's racist."

Elijah said, "People still have the lingering memory of a little gang incident involving a certain Latin gang. They won't like a Mexican theme."

Phil said, "Our jalapenos won't be ready for another month, anyhow."

Jayden said, "We got strawberries this time of year. We could have a strawberry festival."

"Whatever," Ty said. "We need to make the festival bring everyone out."

"Hell yea!" Rata said, "You know what Ayanna would do?!"

They all looked at him.

Rata said, "She would tell you to have a beauty contest, right? Let all the women come out with, maybe just a few pieces of duct tape on them. . .and maybe their socks."

Jayden laughed, remembering the pornographic tactics that were employed with great success by his wife many years ago.

Rata said, "You laugh, but you know the crowd would be really big."

Jayden said, "Maybe, but could we count on you to look for the rifle while this is going on?"

Rata said. "You guys know me way to well."

Phil said, "I'll tell Amy we want to have a festival."

"Fiesta," Rata said.

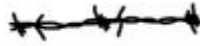
"Fine; fiesta. She'll get the ball rolling. You all can tell her about the beauty contest, especially the part about the duct tape. I ain't gettin' beat up."

The others all looked at each other, waiting for someone to volunteer to tell Amy.

"That's what I thought," Phil said.

Ty said, "Let's have it real soon, okay?"

Phil said, "No problem."



That weekend the First Annual Crawfordton Strawberry Fiesta took place. Dark clouds were overhead. It was breezy and the trees were showing the undersides of their leaves. Phil said he could see the rain in the distance and it was definitely going to rain.

Nevertheless, there was a good crowd of about two hundred of those who would never miss a chance to see and be seen in public. Amy's social network had really gotten the word out.

Tables were lined up all along Harris road. There were all kinds of things available for sale. But the assortment of goods made Patrick chuckle inside as it reminded him of what was available in Ottawa. People in Crawfordton would certainly have thought they were higher class than those scoundrel Gofinns in Ottawa, Indiana, but the recycled, and repurposed items were essentially the same as the Gofinns.

Bella was in charge of a table that included some strawberries from the Farm, and various types of ammunition, including two of the Arisaka cartridges.

A girl with cutoff shorts and a top made from scarves walked by.

Rata said, "Damn. We didn't really need a beauty contest. There are a lot of women tramping it up here."

Patrick said, "Maybe we better make them stop, huh?"

Elijah said, "Let's try and focus on the task at hand, okay?"

Patrick's main assignment was to watch over Bella's table from a distance. Phil, Jayden, Elijah and Rata were mingling, trying to look over everyone who was shouldering a rifle.

Rain started falling a bit. Some of the merchants were starting to cover up their wares not long after the Fiesta started.

Elijah said, "So much for this plan. It was worth a try."

"It may clear up," Phil told Elijah. "Look over there."

"It's dark, but the wind is coming from the other direction."

"No, not that. That guy over by the hickory tree. Navy blue shirt."

"What?"

"No, wait until he turns around again."

Elijah watched. "Nice catch, Phil. I'm going to move in for a better look." Elijah moved closer, keeping a keen eye on the subject, who had a rifle slung over his shoulder. Strangers always get the most scrutiny in a small town. Elijah maneuvered directly behind the man. He was about the same size as Patrick. The guy did have dark hair, which was long, and a beard, which was common. Elijah couldn't get a view of the receiver of the rifle, because the man's elbow was on top of it.

Bella nudged Patrick who finally saw Elijah following the person of interest. So Patrick moved closer to provide backup.

Then Rata saw the other two so he moved in. Rata also looked at the rifle, which was still covered by the man's elbow. Rata realized that Elijah was waiting to get a look at the receiver to see if it had a chrysanthemum or the evidence of the removal of one.

Rata bent over to pick up some debris on the road. He found a tiny pebble and flicked it with his thumb at the back of the stranger's neck. The man clearly thought he was swatting at an insect, but he used his arm that was not covering the rifle.

Finally, Elijah moved around to the front of the man. The other men moved in close preparing for a struggle.

Elijah said, "Excuse me, sir. What kind of rifle is that?"

"I don't really know."

"Can I see it?"

"Sure. You interested in buying it?"

"Yea." Elijah inspected the rifle, it said, "made in U.S.A." on it. That ruled out it being an Arisaka. That guy was not the one.

"Patrick!" Bella said, trying to get his attention from her place at the table.

Patrick turned around hearing Bella's voice. He went over to the table.

In her excitement, she struggled to keep her voice down. "You were supposed to stay here!"

"We thought. . ."

"Never mind that. A guy just bought those two rounds. That's all he bought. He had one in his pocket to compare them to."

"What?"

"Yea, he's got a green t-shirt on. Bald guy with a long dark beard."

"Which way did he go?"

"Over there."

"You stay here," Patrick said. "Elijah!"

Elijah handed back the rifle and thanked the man for letting him see it. He walked over to Patrick, followed by the others. "What?"

"A guy bought the Arisaka."

"Just that?"

"Yea. Bald guy, long black beard and green t-shirt. Went south."

Elijah said, "Spread out. Find him, now."

Chapter 13

In less than a minute Elijah found the newest suspect casually looking at the wares on another vendor's table. He was picking up old rusty hand tools and studying them. He clearly had no clue that he was being watched. The suspect did not have a rifle, but he was wearing a sidearm.

That same feeling came over him. The feeling he had when he was getting ready to bust someone. Even though the suspect was totally unaware, the tension was mounting. Those who were about to piss away a huge chunk of their lives in incarceration were not always happy about the encounter and didn't always cooperate. Elijah pulled out his semi-automatic pistol and made his move. "Put your hands up. you are under arrest."

The man didn't move.

The vendor at the table pointed his shotgun at the man's face. "Hey! You deaf?!" Everyone in town knew who Elijah was, and were eager to cooperate with him.

"You talkin' to me?" The suspect slowly looked around. There were about a dozen people pointing their firearms directly at him. His hands slowly went up.

Elijah cuffed one of the man's hands to the other behind his bald head. "Let's go."

"Hey. What is this?" The man said.

"You have the right to remain silent until I tell you to talk," Elijah said, "And that's pretty much it."

"This is bull!" The prisoner said. "Hey! You people gotta stop this! This isn't right! Let me go!"

"What did he do?" a woman asked.

"Yea, you gonna shoot him?" a man asked.

"No, their gonna hang him," another man said. "You don't mess with the law in Crawfordton."

Elijah said, "We can't discuss that right now. This man is only a suspect, okay?"

"Yea, right!" an older woman shouted. "I'll bet he is."

Ty found Elijah while he was perp walking the captive. A huge crowd gathered to see what was going on. "Get back!" Ty ordered.

The rain started coming down. The rest of the team gathered around the prisoner. The crowd backed off a little.

Rata said, "This Fiesta turned out pretty good."

"Yes, it did," Elijah said. He put a blindfold over their captive's eyes.

"Why are you doing that?!" he asked.

Elijah did not respond.

"Thank you for your help," Ty said to Phil, who headed back to his nearby home.

The nosy crowd kept following the prisoner. Finally the activity came to Constable Jayden Phipps's attention. He and some of his men did some crowd control, forcing everyone back so the Inspector and his team could have their privacy. The rain turned into a downpour and the Fiesta attendees finally got tired of getting wet, so they gradually dispersed. Elijah asked Patrick, Bella, and Rata to make sure no one was watching them as they broke away to go to the Farm. There were no guarantees someone couldn't be watching them from a distance through a window, but it looked okay.

Elijah and Ty took their soaked prisoner back to the Farm and out to the shed. The shed had an old beat up UN truck in it. A smelly sofa and a riding mower. Along the walls were rusty agricultural hand tools.

The man said, "You mind telling me why I am here?"

Ty said, "We'll get to that in a bit."

Elijah said, "Let me see your cuffs."

He held his hands out. Elijah unlocked one side of the handcuffs. The man held out the other hand to be unlocked. Instead, Elijah locked the free side to the steering wheel of the riding mower.

"Hey!" Their prisoner said, feeling his restricted arm. "I'm not staying here! This is bull . . ."

"We'll be right back," Ty said. Ty removed the blindfold.

A meeting convened in the kitchen. Elijah asked Bella, "He bought those Arisaka cartridges?"

"Yes. That was the only ones he bought. It was scary. I asked him if he knew what they went to, and he told me his Arisaka."

"That's all he said?" Ty asked.

"Yea."

Elijah said, "What we'll do is to take turns interrogating the guy. Then we'll compare notes."

"Who's first?" Ty said.

Patrick said, "I'd send Rata first."

"Sure, I'll go."

"Go ahead, then," Elijah said.

Rata went into the shed and laid down on the couch.

"Hey! What's going on!"

Rata said, "I'm not supposed to tell you, but we are going to keep you here for a week."

"What?!"

"Yea. I told them that was stupid. That guy out there didn't do nothing wrong."

"I didn't do anything. I'm telling the truth. Can't you let me go?"

"I ain't got the key. . .uh, what's your name?"

"Carl. My name is Carl Yuwahl."

"Huh?"

"Carl Yuwahl, I said."

"Oh, You-all. Sounds kinda *hilly billy*."

" So can you get me out of here, Eh?"

Rata turned away on the couch. "I have to watch you for a couple of hours. You may as well relax. I'm going to take a nap."

"Hey! This isn't right! You can't just haul people off of the street! I thought the ISA was a country where people had rights!"

"Sorry, but that's the same thing I told them. They won't listen to me, I just a Mexican, who they hate. So you may as well take it easy, You-all, or U-Haul. You talk different. Where you from?"

"Um. . .Eastern. . .Ohio."

"Oh yea. Near Lima?"

"Um. . .yea."

Checkmate. Rata knew he had him. Anyone from the eastern part of Ohio knows that Lima is nowhere near there.

Rata fell asleep and started snoring. He slept for about an hour as Carl sat in the seat of the riding mower.

"Hey!" Carl said, "Not to interrupt your siesta, but I'm thirsty."

"Damn. That's offensive," Rata said, "I was sleeping good." Rata got up from the couch and started heading toward the side door.

Yuwahl said, "Hey. After you get my water, you going to get the key?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"They don't trust me in there. They say that Mexicans always steal."

Rata went into the house. Elijah was playing the Inspector in a game of chess.

"Full report," Elijah said.

"He's guilty. His name is Carl You-all. He is definitely not from eastern Ohio, which he tried to lie about, but he is definitely from the east somewhere."

Ty said, "You sure about that?"

"Positive. Dude, you know I questioned the guy for over an hour. He just slipped up under the pressure. I'm way too smart for him."

"How did you do it?"

"Damn! I hate that! Are you asking me or him?! The dumbass says he's from eastern Ohio and thinks Lima is in eastern Ohio, Okay?!"

Patrick said, "You'll learn, Lynch."

Ty shook his head. "Who's next?"

Rata said, " Also, he was kind of a smartass when he mentioned the ISA. He's a hater. And he said he is thirsty."

"Bella." Elijah said, not looking up from the chessboard.

"Don't get too close to him, Babe," Patrick said.

Bella took a plastic tumbler of water out to the shed. She handed the water to Carl.

Yuwahl chugged it down. "You here to let me go now? Hey! don't I know you?"

"I don't know." Bella cowered as much as she could without looking like she was obviously cowering.

"I know I ought to know you. What's going on?! What are they going to do to me?! You gotta help me!"

Bella said, "I don't have the key. I can't let you go."

"Are they really going to keep me here a week?"

"I don't know." Bella started to tremble.

"Get the hell out of here and tell them to get me out!"

Bella ran into the house.

Bella was back in the house only after a couple of minutes. She had a frantic look on her face.

"That was quick," Elijah said.

"I didn't find out anything. Maybe he hates women."

Elijah said, "Patrick, you go next. Our chess game isn't over yet."

"It might as well be," Ty said.

"Rata," Elijah said, "Are those cartridges still in his front pocket?"

"Yeah. I'm not taking them out. That is the one thing I will not do."

Elijah asked Rata, "Does he know why we have him here cuffed to our mower?"

Rata said, "He does, because he did it. But he doesn't know that we know. You know?"

Elijah said, "Go ahead, Patrick, tell him that he is a person of interest."

"And a rotten bastard," Lynch said.

Elijah said, " Play the nice guy. After all, you really are the nice guy."

Chapter 14

Patrick Kelly went out to the shed, unsure of how to approach the situation. He walked up, until he was very close to Yuwahl. Yuwahl was sitting in the mower seat stretching his back which was clearly giving him some discomfort.

"Another one?" Yuwahl asked. "You people letting me go now? Or are you people a bunch of filthy cannibals?"

Patrick said, "I'm going to search you now. Don't do anything that I will have to make you regret." He patted down Yuwahl and felt the high powered cartridges in his front pocket. Then he slid his hand in the pocket and pulled them out. "What is this?"

"What's it look like?"

"I asked you first."

"Bullets."

"What kind?"

"Arisaka."

"Where did you get them?"

"At the Fiesta. . .Hey! That woman. She. . ."

"Where is it? Your rifle?"

"At home. I wish I had it here."

"What?"

"I should be let go. You people are pissing me off."

Patrick asked, "So where do you live?"

"That's my business."

"You know, if you could show us your rifle, we might let you go. Plus we might pay you some money for your trouble."

"I don't want your damn money! What is so special about my Arisaka?"

"Someone killed a mailman out on the highway. They used an Arisaka."

Yuwahl swallowed hard. "How do you know that?"

"We just do."

"I think you are just making this all up, so you can blame someone. You aren't blaming me, because there is no proof. Because I didn't do it."

"We don't give half a damn what you think. Will you cooperate and hand over the rifle, or not?"

"How can I, if I am locked up here, you stupid moron? Not that I would tell you anything, anyhow."

Patrick pulled out his pistol. "Do I really look like someone who wants to play games?" He chambered a round. "Again; will you cooperate and hand over the rifle? Yes, or no, smartass? It's a real simple question."

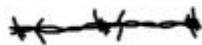
"What are you going to do? Shoot me?"

Patrick was staring intently into Yuwahl's eyes. BLAM! He fired a shot downward, hitting the mower deck. The round ricocheted off of the deck and hit the north wall of the shed, causing some tools to rattle.

Patrick said, "It seems like you are still playing games."

Yuwahl's eyes were as big as silver half-dollars. "You stupid son of a bitch! You could have hit me! You're crazy! I told you I can't because you have me locked up!"

"I do tend to get a little crazy when people ignore my simple requests. Let's try this one more time. "



In the kitchen, they heard the gunshot.

Ty Lynch stood from the table. "No!"

Rata laughed, "Don't worry Inspector. Patrick is smart, and cool. Almost as much as me."

"True enough," Elijah said. "It's your move, Lynch."

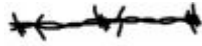
"Forget it! I quit! I'm going out there!"

Elijah said, "Going out there right now would be like me telling you why I'm going to move my bishop over here to back up my rook. Do you think you would have moved your queen where you did, if I would have told you that? Hmmm?"

"Okay, I get it," Ty said. "You guys are really. . .I don't know what."

"Cool," Rata said.

"That's not quite what I was going for."



"You're out of control!" Yuwahl shouted at Patrick.

Patrick Kelly said, "Since there are no real parameters to define my control limits, I'd say anything goes here, right? I'm going to ask you one more time; Again, will you cooperate with us by bringing your rifle here?"

"Fine!" Yuwahl said, "It's at home! I told you, you dumbass!"

Patrick said, "I'll go forward that information. I'll be right back."

He went into the house. "Yuwahl wants to take us to the gun."

Elijah asked, "Do we want to get the gun first, or ask more questions?"

Patrick said, "It might be good to ask some more questions now, giving us a better chance to see if there are more incongruities with his alibi later on."

Rata said, "You talk like a sissy, Patty."

Patrick scowled back.

"I'm next," Lynch said.

Elijah nodded. "After you, inspector."

Ty went into the shed. He looked the rattled Yuwahl into the eyes.

Yuwahl said, "Okay! Are you idiots going to let me go now, so I can bring you the gun?"

"Yes. Let me ask you one more thing, Yuwahl; Why would you want to shoot a defenseless mail carrier? What did he ever do to you?"

"You have no proof of that."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, because I didn't do it."

"Oh well then, that is good enough for me. I should just forget it now, huh?"

"Do whatever you want. You can't prove anything."

"Really? Are you willing to stake your life on it?"



Meanwhile, back at the house, a knock was heard on the door. Rata opened the door. It was Rocky Smillen, as he was known, the network spy from the nearby town of Delburg, with his pistol being held on a young man.

"Hey," Rocky said, "I got your shooter here."

"No. I'm not a *shooter*, I told you," The young man said.

"Come on in," Rata said. "Let's talk about it."

"Let's," Elijah said, "Have a seat at the table. What's your name, son?"

"Tanner Wharton. I don't know what this guy is talking about. He made me walk all the way over here, like, I shot a guy or something. I don't even have a gun."

Rata quickly raised his head in surprise, "How can you not have a gun?"

Patrick looked at Rata and held his hands out in surprise. "*You* rarely carry a gun."

Rata looked at Patrick, shook his head and scowled.

Elijah said, "Where are you from, Tanner?"

"I'm from New York"

The mention of a blue state caused them all to gasp a little.

Tanner said, "My dad and brother and I were on the road visiting my uncle in Columbus way back when things went bad. Once we decided to go back home, the GPS went out. We got lost and drove around until we ran out of gas. My brother was killed by a gang. My dad got shot by a robber. He died and I got away and ended up in a militia group. Now I am on my way back to New York again."

Patrick said, "Sorry about your dad."

Rata said, "He really got confused driving around. Sounds kind of unbelievable. We are west of Columbus, you know."

Rocky said, "That's right! Don't believe that stupid story. In fact, I don't believe his stupid name is real. This guy is a blue stater who hates the ISA and killed your mailman. Some guys lynched his brother for being a Homeland sympathizer and now he is out to terrorize the ISA. I got plenty of witnesses that he threatened to kill one of our residents!"

Tanner said, "In the first place, my brother did not deserve to die for his opinions! But I am not him! And I don't agree with what he said! And I didn't kill anyone! But if you keep saying that, I could learn to really hate you, even though I have spent most of my life here now, on the Red side, as you call it!" Tanner told Elijah, "Whoever you people are, will you please tell this guy to put down his gun and let me go?"

Elijah said, "That would be impolite."

"Huh?"

Elijah explained, "Well, I mean, impolite to Mr. Smillen here. After all, he went to all of the trouble to arrest you and bring you over here. And since here you are guilty until proven innocent, I think I must honor his effort, don't you think?"

Tanner rolled his eyes. "So you are keeping me here because it is polite? How am I supposed to prove I am innocent? I can't remember what was going on that day."

Rocky said, "So, since you forgot you shot the guy, we are supposed to let you go?"

"Come on!" Tanner said.

Elijah said, "Rata, can you take Tanner out back and interview him?"

"No problemo."

Rata and Tanner walked out back, which was originally front yard.

Rata said, "Dude, if you want to escape right now, I'll let you."

"Huh?"

"No really. If you want to get away, I'll just say I sneezed or something and didn't see you get away."

"What? You guys are messed up in the head. I never killed anybody, and I resent the fact that you are saying I did. I guess I would kill if I had to, but I never have."

"Last chance. . ."

Tanner walked back into the house on his own accord and proclaimed to the others, "I have never killed anyone in my life! You guys are crazy! I am walking away, right now!"

Elijah said, "Don't leave town. . .er Delburg that is. We'll let you know if we need you."

Rocky said, "That's it?"

Elijah said, "Yep."

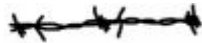
Rocky said, "Damnit! Maybe we *are* crazy."

Elijah said, "Let me tell you a little secret about investigation. After thirty years, I have never one time had the perp not know where they were at the time of the crime. Henry Miller would have told you the same thing if he was still around. Tanner had no clue where he was. His ignorance was no act. He just oozes innocence. Rocky, we appreciate your effort, but you're wrong. Back in Detroit I could never get away with just letting him go. But now that is what I am going to do, because I know for a fact that I am right."

Rata said, "Yea, and I told him he could leave, and he didn't. Tanner knew you did not have any kind of a case."

"What?!" Rocky said. "Fine. I'm going home. I'll tell you this much; I ain't in no mood for any of his liberal crap though."

"That's why we like you," Elijah said.



Back in the shed, Yuwahl told Inspector Lynch, "Look, you idiot. I can show you my gun, but that doesn't mean anything."

"So show us your gun."

"Let's go, stupid. Right now."

Chapter 15

Eastern Lake Erie, Neutral Waters

Both Homeland and the ISA had amassed their fleets, sitting motionless in stern opposition to each other. The sun was beginning to set. This did not give anyone comfort, because they would lose visual confirmation that the other side was not making a move. Consequently, the unnerving change in the situation would likely result in someone pulling the trigger.

Lieutenant Kirkendahl of the LeHew said, "I don't like this one little bit. I hope we either pull back or do something now. Seaman! radio the Green Bay and ask for clarification!"

"Aye sir!"

"Cancel that order, seaman," The Captain followed.

"Aye aye sir."

Captain Bernard looked at the Lieutenant and said under his breath, "No way should we pull back. We own these waters. They can drink them before we pull back. I'm sure as hell not going to go shopping for a wimpy assed order to the contrary."

"Aye, sir," Kirkendahl said.

"The admiral will tell us when he wants us to do something."

"Sir!" The radioman said. "Word is that they have a name on that big battle wagon. the *HS President Wilson*."

"Figures," Kirkendahl said.

While the sun had most of the way disappeared into the water to the west, there was a rumble. The LeHew knew that they were at the salient position of the ISA projection of power and the most vulnerable. They could hear projectiles falling into their immediate area.

The Captain looked out over the deck and saw nothing.

"Sir!" the Ensign shouted. "Waterspouts on our six!"

Lt. Kirkendahl said, "Sir! Full broadside from the Wilson!"

Captain Bernard ordered, "Full speed ahead, employ zigzag. Set course for President Wilson. Fire deck gun when ready. Continuous fire."

"Full speed ahead, employing zigzag."

The Ensign used a megaphone. "Fire! Continuous fire!"

Within two seconds the eight-inch deck gun blasted, heaving the LeHew as if it sneezed. The echoes of metal on metal; the cannonball hitting the Wilson came back.

The deck gun Ensign said, "Fire! Fire! Fire! Remember your steps!" The gun crew did well to hit the target while the ship zigzagged.

The sound of the Wilson's numerous guns sounded like little popguns compared to the LeHew's much larger, single deck gun. But some of the Wilson's rounds ripped across the front of the LeHew, raking all the way through the ship, from the front to the back, ripping parts of the LeHew to shreds.

But the deck gun was still intact, firing every few seconds, as was the Wilson's guns. It appeared from smoke billowing out of a gun port that at least one of the Wilson's guns, or it's gun crew, had been eliminated.

"Sir!" The navigator warned, "We're in Canada."

Lt. Kirkendahl looked at Captain Bernard who looked back with a determined look. The Lieutenant did not say anything.

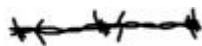
The Ensign said, "Sir, The Wilson is turning to the north."

The radio man said, "Sir, the Admiral says cease fire."

Bernard said, "Damn it all! Why?! Cease fire."

"Cease Fire! Cease Fire!" the Ensign ordered.

"Shall disengage now, sir?" Kirkendahl asked.



While the HS President Wilson was trying to turn, a smaller boat about one tenth the size of the Wilson pulled along its side. *The Sea Unicorn* was an ISA Q-boat, or a military vessel under the guise of a commercial carrier. The Sea Unicorn was able to sneak up to the Wilson because of its non-threatening appearance during the skirmish with the LeHew.

In the cramped and crowded hull of the Sea Unicorn, Major Ayanna Crawford told her Ohio Marines. "Come on you dogs! Go get me a battleship!"

The Ohio Marines charged up to the deck and barely had to step up to board the Wilson because its waterline was so low. Major Ayanna observed some minor damage to the Wilson, but the ship was essentially intact.

The Wilson's crew was taken totally by surprise by the boarding action. Some of the Wilson's crew were jumping overboard, trying to swim to other Homeland vessels. None of the remaining Homeland sailors were able to muster a resistance.

Upon seizing the command post of the Wilson, Major Crawford told the executive officers of the Wilson, "Thanks for the boat, boys." She told the Wilson's radioman, "You! Go take a swim."

The Wilson's radio man said, "Thank you, Ma'am," and hurried out of the control room.

An Ohio Marine took control of the radio and started tuning in to their assigned frequency. "The pizza is in the oven. The pizza is in the oven."

Major Crawford said, "From now on, this ship will be called the President Ronald Reagan. Driver, thataway please." Major Crawford pointed south.

Then bullets from small arms started showering the control room.

Marine Captain Winkle said, "News travels fast."

The navigator of the Wilson passively stood in resistance.

"South!" Major Crawford said. "Right now! You want to know what happens to you, if I have to drive this tub by myself?"

"Yes sir, I mean we are going south, Ma'am. . . I mean, Sir!"

Ayanna said, "Man, I hate that whole gender thing. Now go!"

It was getting darker by the minute now. The small arms gunfire directed upon them by the flotilla started to subside as the Wilson reached their own ISA fleet. Homeland vessels did not want any part of moving toward, and engaging the ISA fleet without its super heavyweight, so they pulled back north.

Ayanna said to one of her Marine Captains, "Winkle, you hear something?"

"Yea, I think. . .It's a helicopter."

"You mean one of those whirly twirly maple tree seed thingys?"

"Yea. Helicopter, I guess. Never heard one before."

Ayanna had never seen a helicopter, only in books. In fact she had rarely seen any aircraft during her entire lifespan, most of which was post-apocalyptic. "We got any helicopters?"

Captain Winkle said, "I'm at least 67 percent sure that we don't."

Soon they saw the eerie lights and sounds hovering over Lake Erie. The helicopter moved toward the LeHew, then paused to hover over it.

Major Crawford cheered on her comrades over on the LeHew, "Come on Garfield! Aim the gun!"

The LeHew's deck gun fired at the helicopter, but the helicopter still hovered in one place. The helicopter fired a modern air to ship missile at the LeHew. The missile exploded into a fireball, annihilating the deck gun crew.

"Oh my God. . ." Ayanna said quietly. "My boys." Ayanna had previously spent some time as the deck gun Ensign for the LeHew.

Then there was a cataclysmic explosion as the weapons magazine down below on the LeHew had ignited. The entire LeHew went up in a fireball. Hot debris flew in all directions, and came raining down into the uncaring Lake. Nothing was left of the LeHew to take in water.

Major Ayanna was in a daze. "My boys. . . They're all dead."

After the attack helicopter admired its handiwork, the helicopter moved from the scene of the sinking ship. The helicopter started shooting its 20mm cannon fire at smaller boats. Then the chopper moved to attack the Sea Unicorn.

Captain Winkle said, "They won't attack us, we have hostages."

The Skipper of the Wilson said, "If you think that, you're crazy. We're as doomed as that other boat of yours."

"Those were great men on that ship," she said.

"Major! What would Sun Tzu say to do right now?"

"Huh. . .Sun Tzu. . . I think Sun Tzu would agree we're screwed. This is exactly the situation he tells you to avoid. Start prayin'."

The Captain said, "We're totally screwed. Will you let us get off of the ship?"

"Negative," Ayanna said, "Just in case they take pity on your wretched souls."

Major Crawford said to her team, "Let's go see if these Homeland Homies got a deck gun! Move! Move!" She pointed at a couple of her men and gave orders. "You! You! Stay here and watch 'em. Everyone else, main deck!"

On the way to the deck, Captain Winkle said, "Major, I don't know how to fire a cannon."

"It's easy when you know how. Now move!"

They got to the fore deck and found the gun.

"Damn!" Ayanna said, "That thing is just a baby. But she'll do." She was looking around on the deck.

Captain Winkle asked, "What?!"

The Major said, "Whoa! Whoa! perfect!" She picked up a heavy chain."

"What good is that?!" Captain Winkle asked.

"Hurry, put that powder sack in there." After the powder was in the cannon she started stuffing the chain into the barrel of the cannon.

"What the heck!?" Winkle said looking to see where the helicopter was going.

"You never heard of chain shot?" Ayanna put powder into the breach and grabbed the firing torch that was nearby.

"You can do that?"

"We could have doorknob shot if we had 'em'. If any bit of this chain flies into that propeller, it's game over."

The helicopter flew over the length of the Ronald Reagan strafing it with 20mm cannon fire. Ohio Marines were firing at it from all angles while being shot at from Homeland boats. A couple Marines were hit during the strafing run and instantly perished.

Then the helicopter moved to the front of the ship. It turned to face them.

Captain Winkle said, "They're gonna fire! Up! Left! No right! More right!"

More cannon fire came down. A couple of the rounds hit Captain Winkle who vanished in a mist.

Ayanna fired the cannon just as the helicopter moved laterally to evade some of the small arms fire. Clearly the chain did not hit the still functioning rotor. It would only

be another second until the helicopter spit more of its deadly missiles out at the ship. Then they would suffer the same fate as the LeHew.

Ayanna knew that it was too late to give the order to abandon ship. If the helicopter did a repeat performance of the LeHew attack, they could all be dead in seconds.

Then the helicopter started turning in circles. It continued to spin uncontrollably. The chain shot from the cannon had totally severed the tail stabilizing rotor. The helicopter spun out of control and went down until it crashed into the water. The detached rotor flew off and smacked the side of the armored ship with no effect.

The Marines cheered as the helicopter sank. Ayanna looked around for Captain Winkle. All she found was one of his boots with the foot still in it. She stood trying to comprehend what all had just taken place. Her men, happy for the victory and sad from losing comrades, were all silent when they approached her. She stared blankly as she held Winkle's boot. How was it possible that such damage could come from the helicopter? There was just enough light from nearby fires to see Ayanna was completely covered with blood, to the extent that it was dripping off of her.

Chapter 16

Outside of Crawfordton, Ohio

La Rata followed Patrick, who had Yuwahl handcuffed to him. Yuwahl led them to a farmhouse about three miles east of Crawfordton. There was a long two-tenths of a mile walk back to the house from the road.

"Patrick asked, "So, you live alone here, huh?"

"Yea," Yuwahl said, "How many times do I have to tell you?"

Rata said, "The sooner we get in there and get the gun, the faster we get outta here."

Patrick said, "That is a little unnerving. Usually you. . ."

Just then a shot was heard at close range. Yuwahl collapsed, and his falling weight drug Patrick down into the gravel driveway, which was overgrown with some weeds.

Yuwahl was dead from a bullet wound right on the nose. Another shot that had clearly came from the house was heard. Rata went down.

"Rata!"

"Dude, I'm Okay! I just took cover! Quick, pull him into the grass!"

Next to the gravel lane was tall grass on both sides. Rata rolled his way over to the tall grass. Patrick crawled on all fours pulling as hard as he could to drag Yuwahl's limp body with him into the grass. Another shot was taken at them, and sod right next to Patrick flew up into the air.

Patrick said, "Look! Upstairs window!" A shooter with a rifle was taking aim at them. "He can still see us! Stay low!"

"Shoot him!" Rata said. "I ain't got no gun."

Patrick said, "I gotta get this dead guy off of me so I can move!"

They both frantically moved and jerked around, since they had no hard cover, and they were trying to stay out of direct line of sight. Then they heard another shot and bullet zipping past them.

Patrick dug around in his pants pocket for the key to the cuffs. He pulled it out, but dropped it in the grass. "Dang it!"

Another bullet buzzed by.

"Never mind that!" Rata said. "Shoot! Shoot! I'll get your key!"

Patrick pulled his pistol out of the holster and shot three un-aimed shots at the upstairs window of the house. Some of the old rotting wooden siding split away from the impact. The shooter backed away from the window. When he reappeared, Patrick shot at him again. The shooter ducked back in.

"I got the key!" Rata said. "Gimme your hand." Rata pulled the two hands closer to him by the cuffs.

"Ow!" Patrick exclaimed. "Man, you're killing me! Patrick saw the man looking out of the window again and shot again. "I might have got him that time. I can't believe they shot their own guy instead of us. You think that was an accident?"

Rata popped the handcuff open. He said, "Yuwahl thought he was setting us up. His secret pals in that house just wanted to shut him up permanently, at all cost."

Patrick said, "We gotta get out of here! We're going to get shot for sure."

Rata said, "No. We are not leaving. Absolutely not. You know they probably have a bigger fish in that house. The ISA needs more information about this mess."

Patrick said, "We won't have any if we're dead!"

Rata said, "Run up to that tree in front of the porch."

"What!? You're crazy!"

"No, seriously. They won't expect that. You keep them cover and I will get some help. We have to capture them. We can't let them get away."

"I don't know. . .I only got a couple more bullets. Maybe we should get outta here."

Rata said, "Give me that damn gun then! I'll go up to the tree and you run your skinny ass for help."

"Deal."

"Go!"



News of Rata's solo attempt to pin down the Yuwahl's associates reached the farm.

"Damn!" Inspector Lynch said. "It's all my fault. I should have went with them to get the evidence."

Elijah told Ty, "We are a team here. Quick, go over to the house, hop on that bike of yours and then come back and get Patrick so he can give you directions."

"It's three miles down Lock Seven Road." Some of the roads in the area were named after canal locks. The canals were used in pioneer days as the best mode of transportation.

"Alright," Elijah said, "I'll get Jayden's help. The Garrison from the Fort got moved to the front. They ain't never around when you need them."

"Dinner will be waiting," Bella casually said to Patrick's surprise. She was becoming immune to the frequent periods of excitement, just as if they were all just going outside to play until supper.



"He's like a damn squirrel!" one of the occupiers of the house said about Rata. "No matter which way we go, he is behind the tree!" All their chatter accomplished was to tell Rata where they were, and that there were more of them.

"Listen!" One of them said. "It's a motorcycle. I told you that you better not let that skinny one get away or he would bring help. Now were screwed!"

The other one said, "If you wouldn't have taken so long to get that screwed up looking twerp, we could have gotten out of here!"

"Hey!" Rata said from his hiding position, which was still behind the tree. "That's offensive! Why are you shooting at us? We didn't do anything to you."

"That guy we shot. He has been threatening us."

"You didn't see the handcuffs we had on him?"

"No."

Rata said, "Well that's perfectly understandable. Maybe you should come out now. Otherwise the law will have to force you out."

"Law?! What law?!" They started sneaking toward the tree, one crouched down on each side of it.

"Never mind that. You birds better start flying right, because if you don't, you will regret it. I can get real hard with you if you want."

"Is this guy some kind of comedian? Hey! What happened to that motorcycle?"

"Hands up boys." Ty surprised them from behind with his shotgun to the head of one of them. The other guy tried to run and Ty pivoted and blasted him at very short range, then quickly turned to face the original captive.

The guy who was shot had a gaping wound on his back and was shaking violently. Rata came out from behind the tree and shot him in the head.

"You stupid hillbillies!" The prisoner said. "Was that really necessary?"

Rata said, "I was doing the kind thing."

Patrick said, "I seem to remember one of you really close knit friends putting a bullet into Mr. Yuwahl's head."

"He's no more our friend than you are!"

Ty said, "Rata, nice job distracting them for me. Watch this guy for me." Lynch put a sweeping kick of his heavy boots into the back of the captive's legs, knocking him down on the ground. "We're going inside to look around. C'mon, Pat."

"Don't call me that. I hate that name."

"How about Patty?"

"Negative."

"Just kidding."

The house was unusually tidy for a post apocalyptic farmhouse that was old even before the apocalypse. It appeared that the house was abandoned and they just moved in. This was a common occurrence.

Patrick said, "Lookie here!" He found a small room with a crank radio in it. There were maps and notes next to the radio which Lynch gathered up and tucked under his arm.

"Don't touch the settings," Ty said. "We may be able to figure out who they were listening to." Ty couldn't believe his eyes. Standing upright in the corner, a bolt action rifle, with a chrysanthemum symbol on it. Aaaaarrrriiiiizzaki!"

"You found it?!" Patrick asked.

Lynch said, "Every once in awhile, something has to go right." He picked it up by the end of the barrel. "We can at least try to get some prints off of it."

Eventually, some of the Crawfordton Guardsmen showed up at the house in support. Ty requested that they leave a few men there to guard the farm and not to touch anything, the case being a matter of national security. The men readily obliged. Ty put the maps and documents in his motorcycle saddlebags and rode off. Rata and Patrick took the lone suspect with them to their headquarters.

Chapter 17

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Clarence Harmon laid in bed staring at the alarm clock. It was 3:23 am. He felt guilty that he was living in luxury while his fellow countrymen were busy trying to eke out a living with little to their names.

All he could do is replay the conversation over and over in his mind, that he had with the Foreign Minister. Did he do the best he could?

The phone rang.

"Harmon here."

"Mr. Harmon, the Foreign Minister Youngblood would like to speak with you."

Clarence was no longer slumbering. "Now?!"

"That's right."

"Put him on."

"Mr. Harmon?"

"Yes."

"Youngblood here. Mr. Harmon, I am insisting on a comment concerning the ISA actions in Lake Erie."

"I'm afraid that you have me at a disadvantage, your Excellency. What happened in Lake Erie?"

"You didn't hear about the ISA piracy of one of Homeland's warships in Canadian waters?"

Harmon swallowed hard. "No, sir I did not. Do you have any proof of this, sir?"

The Homeland warship, the President Woodrow Wilson was in a fleet and was boarded by pirates. The pirate ship was destroyed. The Homeland fleet had a Canadian escort with them."

"Sir, these are very grave charges, which I assure you we will take very seriously. But I really need to find out more about it."

Youngblood said, "There's nothing to investigate! I told you that we had people there! We know what happened! Harmon, I am calling for a news conference with Homeland's Foreign Minister to air this matter to the public."

Clarence said, "Please sir, don't be hasty. Please give us a day or two to get to the bottom of this. There simply must be some kind of circumstances that remain unknown. Not everyone will react positively if you air your grievances right now, and I will be forced to make a statement that casts doubt on whatever you say."

"Fine, Harmon, but be advised that I can't keep this under my hat for very long. If Canadians find out that we are keeping pirates on the Great Lakes a secret there will be a mass outcry."

"Of course, sir. I will get back to you as soon as possible."

Youngblood said, "Hopefully sooner."

"I'll take that under advisement, sir."

Harmon was able to get no better than third-hand messages to the President of the ISA because of the tedious communication system. It would take several hours at the earliest to get a message through their network to Lake Erie and get a response back. But he did not waste time in getting the ball rolling. He immediately left a message with General Markle, National Security Advisor, describing the charges brought forward by the Canadians.

Harmon could only hope the charges of piracy were false. The diplomatic damage would be immense if the ISA Government was behind the actions. It would be the final straw for Canada, who already shifted their support strongly in favor of Homeland.

The Republic of Texas would be sorely disappointed if the ISA, who they called "their brothers to the north" gave them a reason such as piracy, to distance themselves diplomatically.

There were plenty of things to worry about. The future of the Country was paramount, but when he was not worrying about that, he had circular anxieties about Envoy Dull's assassin coming back and getting him too. Clarence could feel the pressure on his body physically. He was not sure if he would be able to continue functioning under such stress.

So he got up and called the Ottawa Police. They told him that his protection was not their concern. And that they get those calls all of the time. As a diplomat, It was the job of the RCMP to protect him. Not trying to sound ignorant, he found out that the

RCMP was the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the national police force. So the Ottawa Police dispatcher forwarded the call to the RCMP.

The RCMP told him that they had received no request for sending someone over to protect him. He reminded them that Marcus Dull's assassination was not solved and he had a legitimate concern. They said they would send someone over when a man became available, but they had been busy controlling a mob that was angry over the ISA's provocations, as if it was his fault they were too busy to protect him.

After the phone call, Clarence looked out the window and didn't see anyone on the street.

Chapter 18

Crawfordton, Ohio

Back at Rata's farmhouse, Inspector Ty Lynch was very happy with all of the confiscated documents and the rifle which was likely to be the murder weapon. Ty and Elijah began to pour over the notes and maps. Rata and Patrick came into the kitchen.

Patrick put the handcuff key on the kitchen table. He announced, "Prisoner is in jail." Everyone knew that Patrick meant that another prisoner was handcuffed to the steering wheel of the riding mower. "He's not very happy."

"Oh wah," Bella said. "They should have thought of that before they went and shot Liam. I hope the worst for him."

Elijah said, "Rata, here's a round for that rifle. Go shoot a round in Crawford's cistern and fetch it out of the water."

"What?!" Rata said. "It is somebody else's turn to be the bitch. That old swimming pool is a nasty green pit of slime."

"It's not always green. Sometimes its brown," Patrick said.

"Hell no!" Rata looked at Patrick. "You go in there Junior!"

"Give me a quarter," Patrick said.

"Huh?" Rata reached into a drawer and pulled out a quarter and tossed it onto the table.

Patrick shook his head. "Really? That is not a silver quarter. I could tell by the sound. Come on, you got money. Lots of it. Cough it up."

"Fine, you whiner."

This time Patrick heard the ping of the quarter on the table. "That's more like it. Let's go."

Rata said, "I can't wait."

Elijah looked at the maps and notebook and said, "This stuff doesn't make a lot of sense," he said, leafing through an old road atlas. "Sure, you can tell, the New York State map has been used a lot, but so has Ontario."

Ty said, "Maybe that old map was used for those places before these guys got their hands on it."

Elijah said, "There is nothing here that tells us much, but it does seem to suggest some kind of coordinated effort by Homeland."

Lynch said, "We already know that. We need more details."

Elijah said, looking at Lynch, "You want to go talk to our guest?"

"It would be my privilege."

Ty walked out to the shed. "So, Yuwahl tells me you boys are from Lima."

"Piss off, bitch."

"That's not very neighborly."

"Neither is you handcuffing me to this worthless outdated technology."

"I don't know if you realize it, but you are in a lot of trouble."

"I'm totally scared."

"What is your name?"

"Tuya. Whatzit Tuya."

"Fine, Tuya. Have it your way. We will be discussing your plan to wipe out our letter carriers."

"I don't think so."

"I will get my information. One way or the other." Ty started to leave the shed.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'?"

"Well, think about it, fool. What is the difference between you and me?"

"You are evil and I am good."

"Really. You are so high and mighty out here in Dumbassistan, with your Bibles and guns. Why do you think you are better than me?"

"Everyone is better than you. You came and killed innocent people in our Country, for one."

"Country? What country? Jesusland? Land of ignorant idiots, who all they know is to kill each other, and whine about your rights to shoot people. It's pretty sickening."

Ty was at a loss for words.

Tuya continued, "You know that is what you are? You know I am right. Tell me if you would have been born in Homeland that you wouldn't be trying to win the war against a bunch of ignorant separatists. You morons caused this whole mess to begin with."

"Shut the hell up!" Ty said. "I was just in high school at the time!"

"So what is your problem? Why do you believe in a fake country anyhow? I don't care if you shoot me. You are still wrong. Your whole rebellion is wrong! Such idiots."

"Who says we are rebelling against you? Since when did you snobs claim the throne?"

"We are the legal, legitimate, United States. We call it Homeland, because it is improved, now that we got rid of all the backward, inbred, violent, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, bigoted Bible thumping extremists."

Ty got into the face of "Tuya". "The only reason I don't shoot you right now is because you are going to tell me everything you know about killing ISA postal workers."

Tuya started laughing. "You crack me up, you simple idiot."

"Have it your way. Just stay here and rot."

As Lynch left the shed Tuya was screaming, "Use your damn head! You are no different than me, fool! We are the same!"



Patrick and Rata were walking over to Crawford's house.

Patrick said, "You see those kids over there?"

"Uh huh."

"Watch this." Patrick walked up to a group of a half dozen ten year old boys who were just loitering around looking bored.

"Hey guys," Patrick said, "I got a question for you."

The boys stared at Patrick as if they had done something wrong, which, being a group of boys, undoubtedly at some point, they had.

"How many of you guys know how to swim?"

Four of them raised their hands, looking at each other, unsure of where Patrick's line of questioning was going.

"You guys, who can swim. You want to be in a contest?"

They shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads.

"There is a prize."

Patrick now had their full attention.

"A silver quarter."

"Really? The oldest looking boy asked. "What is the contest?"

"Follow me. The contest is over at the Crawford House."

Patrick and the young followers went to Phil Crawford's house and knocked on the door. Amy answered. She looked ill.

"Are you okay, Mrs. Crawford?"

Amy said, "It's Phil. He's not doing too good today. I don't know."

"Sorry. What's wrong?"

Amy said, "I don't know. I want him to go to the clinic, but he won't, so I am going to have Doctor Williams come over here."

"That's good," Patrick said.

"What are you boys up to?" Amy tried to force a smile.

Patrick said, "We just wanted to see if Phil would let us use your pool out back to do some ballistics checking on this rifle. It involves shooting into the water."

"Will it hurt the pool? You know we rely on it for watering the garden and such."

"Yes, I know. I can't say that it won't. This rifle is pretty high powered. But I am not exaggerating when I say it is a matter of national security."

Amy was used to that kind of importance being attached to the activities of people coming by. She casually said, "Well, go ahead then if you need to. Try your best not to punch any holes into that old pool. I'll tell Phil that you are going to do some shooting so he doesn't get startled or worried by it."

"Thank you Amy," Patrick said.

Rata said, "Tell him we hope he gets better."

"All right."

Patrick said, "Come on, boys."

They went to the back yard. The old above ground pool had a wooden deck to the side of it. The surface of the water was caked with heavy green slime.

Patrick said. "Okay boys, this is how the contest will work. I am going to shoot this rifle into the pool and then when I say 'go', you all go in and look for the bullet. The first one who finds it will win this 1953 Quarter Dollar."

"I'll win," a small boy said.

"You can't win, stupid. You are too slow and can't swim."

Rata asked the little boy, "Can you swim?"

"Yes. I can swim good enough. He just has a big mouth."

The other boys laughed.

"Okay then." Rata said. "The trash talk is flying. Go ahead, Pat."

Patrick sighed. "Everyone get back. I'm going to shoot at as much of an angle as possible to slow the bullet down, but bullets can ricochet off of water, you know."

With a crack of the rifle, Patrick ran around to the opposite side and looked for a hole in the pool. "Yes! It looks like it is in the pool, as long as it didn't fly off of the surface of the water."

The boys were all up on the deck eagerly ready to plunge into the green slimy, foul smelling water.

Patrick raised his arm, then said, "Go!" and dropped his arm.

They jumped in. The two larger boys went straight to the point that the bullet hit the surface of the water and began diving down looking for the bullet.

Another boy went straight to the back of the pool, obviously figuring that Patrick went to the back of the pool to look for a hole for a reason. The smallest contestant tagged along behind him.

"Hey quit following me!" He said, giving the little one a shove backwards.

Rata shouted, "No shoving! If I tell you again, you are disqualified!"

"What's disqualified?" the minimally educated boy asked.

"If you shove again, then you'll lose."

"Oh." He started kicking the little boy under the water.

"Hey! I saw that!" Rata said. "No kicking either!"

All of the boys were going under and pulling up handfuls of debris and tossing some of the green algae out of the pool.

Patrick said, "Keep throwing that junk out of the pool while you're at it. Not at each other!"

The kid who went straight to the back was obviously using his feet to feel for the bullet. Then the little guy started doing the same thing.

Rata told Patrick, "This is the best quarter I ever spent. Not only do I not have to go into that mess, I get a lot of entertainment."

Patrick said, "Yea, it is worth the money not to hear your nonstop cussing."

"Shut the. . ." Rata sneered at Patrick.

The boys were bobbing up and down in the water like some ducks looking for fish. After about twenty minutes of this there was some shouting.

"I got it! I got it! I got it! I win! I win!" the littlest boy held up the bullet.

"Yep," Patrick said, "That's it big guy. Come on out to get your quarter."

The boy came out and Patrick exchanged the Quarter for the bullet. "Thank you."

"Thank you! Now I can buy all kinds of stuff!" Twenty five cents in silver had enough buying power to feed a family for a whole day.

The other boys started to complain, especially the one who's methods were being copied.

Rata said to the most dejected competitor, "He may be small, but he knows who is the smartest, and he followed you."

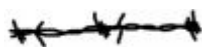
"Yeabut, he got my quarter."

Patrick said to the boy, "That's the way it goes sometimes." Then he told Rata, "You seemed to favor the little guy."

Rata said, "Everyone roots for the underdog. I can relate, you know?"

"Not really."

"Shut up, anyhow."



Magnifying glasses were valuable for being able to start a fire on a sunny day. So those who had them knew where they were.

Back at the farm, Elijah wore the highest magnification reading glasses he could get his hands on and was also using two magnifying glasses together for an image magnified many times. Elijah was studying the partially mashed up bullet taken from Liam's body and comparing it to the nearly intact rifling marks of the bullet pulled from the pool. He kept turning them to look at the marks. Then he found where they looked exactly the same. "It clearly is a match. We have identified the weapon that killed Liam."

Everyone at the farm started high-fiving each other at their accomplishment of uncovering the murder weapon.

"I can't believe it," Bella said. "I mean, I didn't do much, but. . . I actually helped. I did spy work and helped the Country. I still can't believe it"

"Yes you did," Elijah said. "Everyone here helped."

Rata asked, "Can we shoot that guy now? Or just hang him. How 'bout a high profile, public execution? You know, more impact."

"Elijah turned to Ty and said, "That is up to the inspector. That guy does deserve to die, but are you going to try to get to the bottom of the whole thing. Do you want more evidence to prove that Homeland is killing our people?"

Lynch said, "I don't know. How can we ever do anything about it? These guy's bosses are probably hidden well inside Homeland. I agree. Maybe we should just shoot the guy and call it a day."

"Huh?" Bella asked. "Since when did we start giving up on doing the impossible?"

Patrick said, "Well. . .Bella. . ."

"No," Bella said. "I won't accept it. This is not over. Not by a country mile. We gotta do more. What else do we have to do?"

"I'm hungry," Patrick said.

Bella said, "Real smart, Pat. So if we do more, we can't have dinner."

Patrick looked down. "Sorry. Honestly though, I am starved."

Bella sighed.

They all sat at the table looking at each other.

Rata said, "I need a nap." Rata got up and headed upstairs.

Bella shook her head.

"Fine," Lynch said, "If we are gonna do this, then I gotta go back to HQ and get some help. This thing is getting bigger than all of us."

"Now that's more like it," Bella said. "I'll start some dinner." Bella made a contorted face at Patrick.

Everyone sat silent for a few moments, taking in what just happened.

"Holy crapola," Patrick said. "I never knew all this would be a life changing event for her."

Chapter 19

Mt. Sterling, Kentucky

After their Postal Clerk was killed, Crawdad had tried to get help from the Postal Inspectors from their Eastern Regional office up north in Ohio. But the Postal Inspectors said they were too busy to help, since the attacks were occurring in numerous places throughout the Country.

But everyone in town could immediately identify someone who was from out of town by their unfamiliar face and their accent. Word of the terror campaign also confirmed that the attacker was from out of town, so their suspects stuck out like a black sheep.

Within the space of an hour after the killing at the post office, much of the town was already on the outlook for the killer. The primary suspect tried to flee Mt. Sterling, but the response by the townspeople was so quick and resolute, that the shooter couldn't just up and run away using any of the easy or quick routes.

The townspeople, after they heard about the attack, thought they knew who the prime suspect was. He was a white guy from out of the area, certainly somewhere up north with a stranger than usual northern accent. It was a matter of finding the culprit, who had spent the last week trying to hide, but was occasionally spotted, then pursued some more. He had just managed to stay out of reach, but everyone was confident he would be hauled in.

Hiding was futile since there were dozens of hunters around who had trained hunting dogs. The hunters swept the countryside day and night in a coordinated effort by the Sherriff's Department.

Then the suspect was finally cornered in a big barn. The posse would put the squeeze on him until he came out. The County Sherriff gave the word and the team crept in. They soon saw him cowering in the corner of the barn, up in the hay loft.

"Don't come any closer!" The desperate man said. He was holding the farmer's early teenage daughter hostage. Don't come any closer! I swear I'll kill her."

The Sherriff said, "Now calm down. Nobody will get hurt here if you listen."

"I am not going to surrender. I mean it. I'll shoot."

The Sherriff said, "That wouldn't be very smart. You are going to have to give up, because we will take you out."

"Shut up!" the man said, backing tight into the corner with the girl behind him. "I will kill her."

"Then what?" The Sherriff said. "Sounds like you are not thinking ahead. You see that knot in the wood right next to your head?"

"What the hell is wrong with you, eh?!"

"Look at it. The knot in the wood next to your head. Now don't get excited, I am just trying to prove a point."

He looked at the knot. It was about the size of a half-dollar.

"Clem," the Sherriff said.

"Yea I got it," Clem said. Scoping out the knot from across from the other side of the large barn.

The Sherriff said, "Do it."

With the crack of Clem's rifle, the knot popped out of the board, revealing a hole in the barn siding.

The Sherriff said, "There now. You see how easy it would be for us to kill you no matter what you do? I have several other boys here who can do the same thing." He looked at Clem, "No offense, Clem. Just Business."

"A'ight, Sherriff."

The hostage taker was panting uncontrollably.

The Sherriff said, "Here's the deal; I am ordering you to let the girl go and drop your weapon. We prefer that you cooperate with us, otherwise you would be dead already. You gettin' my meaning here?"

The man was frozen in place. "I want a helicopter."

The Sherriff said, "And I want a better job. Now, I am going to tell you this only one more time. That girl means a whole lot more to us than waiting around for you to cooperate."

The man let the girl go. She slowly walked away. He put his hands up, still holding the gun. "I surrender! Don't shoot!"

The Sherriff said, "I need you to put down your gun now, nice and easy. Safety first, you know. Then move away from it, and everything will be okay."

The man complied and was apprehended by the Sherriff and his Deputies.

Since Crawdad had been informed of what was going on across the country with the attacks, he convinced the Sherriff to let him take the prisoner by car with a Deputy, to the Eastern Regional Headquarters in northwest Ohio.

Chapter 20

Northwestern Ohio, on Interstate 75

Tuya is an idiot, Lynch thought. Nothing he said was true or made any sense. But Ty couldn't shake those words out of his head. There was too much time to think while riding his bike north to the Regional Postal Inspector's Headquarters to give his report.

"What is the difference between me and you?!" Tuya's screams echoed in his memory. Was it really true? If he had been born in Homeland, would he be fighting for the other side? Does it really matter? It was one of those times that you need someone else to tell you that what you are doing is right, and you need someone to agree with you.

Ty spotted several people walking in the same direction as him along the edge of the road. They were bundled up in long cloaks with the hood down. They carried cloth sacks to carry meager provisions. They were all adults. He slowed down the bike to speak to them.

"We don't want any trouble, mister," one of them said as they walked. They seemed to move like camels, not able to stop because they had walked for so long.

"Where are you going?" Ty said. Sitting on his idling bike that he walked along with them.

"We are on a pilgrimage back to the Temple of Tolerance."

"Why?"

"Because we are seeking the tolerance of others."

"So answer me, would you be tolerant of someone who killed one of your own people?"

"We don't want any trouble, mister."

"No, what I mean is, do you think it is fair to kill someone?"

"No, absolutely not. We never kill, unless extreme violence is the tolerant and compassionate thing to do."

Ty said, "So what would you do if someone killed one of your people?"

"We have lost many friends. Now we are pilgrims."

"So you would do nothing."

"We are just pilgrims, going to the Temple of Tolerance in Wapakoneta, to seek the truth."

"Okay. Good luck with that."

"Can the luck you speak of help us?"

Ty shrugged his shoulders, knowing that they would not be able to hear him over his revving engine anyway. He resumed down the road. Man, they are out of it, he thought. They would be the same no matter where they were born. They would just go with the flow. How were they different than if they were in Homeland? How was he different?

Ty thought of his past. He knew he would have to stop his bike if he was going to start thinking about the past. Even though years had passed, the pain was too much to bear while riding a motorcycle down a deteriorated road.

Ty thought about his late wife and their son. His wife killed herself because she could not continue on with the relentless fear of the cruel societal breakdown any more. There was nothing but starvation and violence all around. She did not want to waste away in hunger. Any food she would get, she would save for their son. If only she would have stuck it out one more day. Ty knew that every time he thought about his family that he would be overcome by emotion. This time was no different. He leaned over and put his head on his bike he started wailing. "No! No! Damn it. Why didn't you at least try a little more?! Why did you leave us!?"

Then he thought of the days that followed, which were no better. He woke up one day and his little son was gone. Ty almost died of exposure and starvation trying to find him. He had no clue about why he disappeared. He wanted to kill himself, but the only

thing keeping him alive was the thought that his son might turn up at any time, and need Ty's help. If only his wife had been there to help.

After Ty accepted the fact that his family was gone, he decided to join the Post Office. He knew it was a demanding job, but he liked the respect the Postal Inspectors got, so he applied to join, and was accepted. He remembered taking the oath: "I am a Postal Inspector of the Independent States of America. If a crime is perpetrated upon a fellow Postal servant, by God's will, I will in no way cease, until justice is served." But he believed that he failed to find his son. Would he also fail his oath by not catching the postal killer? He felt like he never had any control over his circumstances.

Now he was experiencing this new identity crisis. Ty wanted to know for sure that he was on the right side. These thoughts were a distraction to his work and the very core of his own self image. The pain was catching up. . . causing him to be aimless. What was he doing with his life? What was the point of it? Maybe it was pointless, and nothing really mattered.

"You okay, Mister?" The Pilgrims had caught up to him.

"No. . .Yea. . .I don't know."

"Do you want to go on pilgrimage with us?"

"In a way I do. But I can't right now." Ty was wiping tears from his eyes.

"We are going for answers. Do you need answers?"

"Yes I do. Thank you, but go on ahead. I think I need to look in another place."

The Pilgrim said, "I hope you find what you are looking for."

"Thank you." But Ty did not even know what he was looking for. Relief from the pain. A new purpose to his life. Something. Who would know, or even talk to him about his problems. His new friends at Crawfordton were kind of close but seemed like they were a bunch of smart alecks, making it difficult for him to open up personally about anything sensitive. All of this personal baggage would have to wait until the immediate needs of the oath to the Post Office were fulfilled. He must make it to the Headquarters.

Ty Lynch continued north on his bike. Within an hour he was pulling into the Regional headquarters. The headquarters was an old abandoned gas station just off of an exit at the top of a hill. There were a few armed sentries checking out anyone who tried to enter the station. The sentry quickly recognized Ty, and nodded for him to enter.

The Inspectors secretly used the massive underground gasoline tank that was loaded with gas that was bought from Texas. At times their motorcycle engines would run rough with it, but the gas still worked. Inspectors all rode motorcycles to save on gas, with the exception of the Chief's clunky staff car.

There were a number of Inspectors working on their bikes inside of the garage, where there was a huge collection of scavenged parts for all makes and models of motorcycles. "Lynch!" his friend, Inspector Padmore said, standing up, stretching to his well filled out height of seven feet tall. Welcome back, dude! Where you been?"

Ty said, "I got the goods, man. We are going to crack this thing open."

"Yes!" Padmore said. "I am pretty sure the Chief is ready for your report."

Ty entered the gas station building.

The Chief looked up at him. He looked at a couple of inspectors who were with him in the small room that was adjacent to the garage. "Excuse us." The two left. "Where the hell have you been Lynch?!"

"Chief, I know I have been gone for awhile. . ."

"Yea, quite awhile. You realize we are fighting a war here? A war dammit!"

"Yes sir, but it was worthwhile."

"Oh, is that a fact?"

"Yes sir, please just hear me out. I got some help from some locals who have positive evidence of a shooter."

"That sounds too good to be true. Where is he?"

"He's dead."

"What?!"

"He's dead, we think, I mean we think he was the actual shooter."

"Slow down, Lynch. I sounds like you got nothing. You are making no sense."

"Um. . .Yes sir. We have a terrorist cell member in custody in Crawfordton."

"What's that in your hands?" the Chief Inspector asked.

"We also have some documents and maps that we recovered from their house." Ty placed all of the material on the table.

The Chief started leafing through the documents. "Very interesting." The Chief looked up and shouted, "Johnston!"

Inspector Johnston came around the corner. "Sir?"

"Get a message off to the Chief Inspector General."

"The CIG, Sir? The top guy?"

"Yea, him. We have what looks like a case here against. . .I'll explain later, when his people get here. Do not take no for an answer. Say anything you have to for them to show up. In force, if possible."

"Yes, sir."

The Chief said, "Lynch, take my car and Tiny with you to bring that terrorist here."

"Padmore, Sir?"

"Yes, go please. And don't screw around this time."

Chapter 21

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Clarence heard a raucous noise outside of his window. It sounded like men chanting. He opened the curtains just wide enough to peek out. There was a mob that had replaced the Americans who were daily out there looking for work. Now there was a group of a couple of dozen protesters. They were carrying signs; "ISA Terrorist State"; and "STOP ISA RACISM NOW!"

He saw a car parked across the street that reminded him of the one that carried Dull's assassin. Was that the same car, or was he just being overly anxious?

Clarence couldn't believe that anyone could have such a negative opinion of the ISA. Their predisposition in front of the news cameras was certainly not something that would be helpful to him, either personally or diplomatically. He carefully pulled the curtain back into position.

The phone in Clarence Harmon's room started its tweeting.

"Harmon, here."

"Clancy, this is General Markle, National Security Advisor."

"Hi Bert."

"Hey, I'm going to put you on speakerphone here."

"Is POTISA there?"

"Affirmative."

"Oh boy. . .All right. Go for it."

General Markle spoke over the speakerphone, "Mr. Harmon, we are very sorry that we have put you into this position, especially with the loss of Envoy Dull. You have done an outstanding job up there in light of the circumstances. The fact of the matter is that we have confirmed that there was a confrontation on Lake Erie. It should not be characterized as piracy by any means. The Homeland Fleet sank one of our warships and we seized one of theirs in a boarding action. We also took out an attack helicopter somehow. They started the shooting, I am told."

Clarence asked, "Where do we go from here?"

"I'm afraid that's not all, Mr. Harmon," the General said. "Homeland is massing troops on the border. We are responding in kind. Things are deteriorating badly. I am afraid we could end up in a regional war that everyone would regret."

Clarence took a deep breath. "What about Texas? Hello?"

A woman's voice came over the phone, "Clarence, this is the Secretary of State Speaking."

"Madam Secretary."

"Clancy, you are doing a great job. Sorry you are in such a hotspot right now."

"I'll do my best Madam."

"I have every confidence in you. In regards to Texas, they are very lukewarm with us right now. They seemed to buy into the piracy story. We are working with them right now, but we will have to get more facts about what happened."

"Mr. Harmon, this is General Markle again. We do know that Homeland did intentionally ram a boat of ours, which was posing as a civilian, but evidently we were not keeping it a secret very successfully."

Clarence said, "I'm not going to be able to do very much with that."

"Yea, I know," General Markle said.

The Secretary of State spoke again, "Clancy, I know that things are getting ratcheted up pretty tight, but what I want you to do is stall for time. Get everyone to calm down a notch, okay?"

"I'll do my best, Madam Secretary. It would help if I could get a security detail."

"There's no one with you?" she asked.

"Not yet," he said. "The Royal Canadian Mounted Police said that they would send someone, but that was hours ago."

"We'll see what we can do. We'll get back with you."

After the phone conversation, Clarence wondered if he could get some antacid pills down in the lobby. He took the elevator down. Before he got into the lobby he heard a hubbub of voices. He peeked around the corner and saw the room was full of people with microphones and TV cameras. He backed off without them seeing him, and went back up to the room. It struck him that he had become a very important person.

Clarence thought on his way back to his room, which was worse; letting the media imagine the worst by saying nothing? Or would it be more like out of sight, out of mind

if they had nothing concrete to talk about? He concluded that it would be prudent to stop to think about the situation for awhile. So he turned on the TV news to see what was going on. There was scant little relevant news. Just a bunch of shows produced by Canadian Public Television and some reruns of sitcoms. Evidently, the Canadian public liked to think that nothing that happened south of the border had any effect upon them. Clarence figured no news was good news and decided to lay low.

Clarence worried that one of the reporters would find out that he was in room 342 and they would all start hounding him. He figured it would be best if he didn't leave the room at all. Since there was no one else with him, maybe he shouldn't answer the phone. He was also afraid to order room service, because someone might zero in on his location.

Envoy Dull was a heavy snacker who snacked heavily. He certainly must have some goodies in his luggage. Clarence went to dig around in his luggage. He found a folder that read, "Classified: Top Secret". He wanted to read it, but he knew he did not have the rank for such clearance, and such knowledge could be a burden. Yet, he was filling in for someone else. So by rights, he should read it. Proper ethics told him to wait for the next conference call then ask if he should read it. He stuffed it back into the suitcase.

Bingo! This was certainly a suitcase well packed for the apocalypse. He found a packet of powdered sugar donuts that were picked up from some Canadian convenience store. He opened the package up and fully intended to devour all six of the tasty treats. He wondered if he would ever be able to partake of such a snack ever again. Junk Food; It was a nostalgic delicacy for the ages. He reclined on the bed, munching, as powdered sugar was falling about him.

He closed his eyes and took himself to his happy place. A cottage on the lake with his wife and children. He could smell the steaks on the grill and the fresh cut grass. He could hear the waves lapping up to the shore and the geese honking. The dog was running around with the kids and everyone was overfed and happy. That was about 20 years ago. Where did all of the years go?

The anxieties about the protesters outside and the assassin on the loose would have to wait, as full attention was given over to the donut experience.

Suddenly Clarence heard someone trying to open a service door that interconnects his room with one next to it. Was someone trying to break in, or were they just seeing what was on the other side? He jumped up and grabbed a chair from the small table in the room. He took it over to the door, then he propped the top of the chair under the

door knob and jammed the two back legs in as tight as he could. So even if the door was unlocked, they would not be able to get in.

He called the front desk, letting them know that someone was trying to get into his room. He was told by the front desk that they would, "take care of it." The thought that an assassin might be trying to get into his room was very unnerving. He did not want to die, but most of all, he did not want to let his country down. Who knows what series of events would happen to the people of the ISA if he were killed without making a deal?

Then there were some sharp slams against the side door. He could see the chair starting to buckle. He positioned himself next to his own door that led into the hall, in case he had to escape. Another slam was heard, and the chair was still not crushed. Then totally unexpected, as his back was next to the door to the hall, someone knocked on it. He had never been more startled in his entire life. They had him trapped now. How many was he up against? He looked out the peephole and saw a dark blue uniformed female police officer.

She knocked on the door again before he could open it, "RCMP! Please open the door!"

Clarence immediately opened the door, then pointed to the side door with the chair under it having to think about what to say. "Quick! Get in here! Someone is trying to break in!"

She came into the room and drew her Smith and Wesson model 5946 stainless pistol, pointing it at the door, then turned around and went back out of the room, trying to corner whoever was in there. She was gone for a few minutes and came back and knocked on the door. Again Clarence looked out of the peephole and saw that it was her, so he opened the door.

"I didn't find anyone over there," she said. "I am RCMP Corporal Hailey Martin. I'll be your guard while you are here."

Clarence was very self disciplined in not making sexist remarks, but now it was more difficult than ever to conceal his disappointment in the fact that they sent this "Plain Jane" of a small woman to protect him from a very likely attack.

"Um. . .Jane? Um. . .sorry, you remind me of someone."

"Hailey. Corporal Hailey Martin."

"Yea, sorry. I was thinking maybe they would send over someone higher ranking."

Corporal Martin said, "This would typically be a higher rank assignment, but we are a little thin on manpower right now."

Clarence said, "I am hearing that a lot lately."

Corporal Martin said, "Listen, I didn't see anyone over there. Are you sure someone was actually trying to get into your room?"

"Without a doubt. Whoever it was, they were seriously interested in getting in. If I wouldn't have had that chair there propped up against that door, they would have surely gotten in."

Hailey stared at the door, making a series of expressions as if she was thinking the situation over.

Clarence said, "So has there been any progress in catching Marcus Dull's assassin?"

"We are still investigating."

"That is what you say when you mean 'no', correct?"

"Um. . .no. I'm sorry there has been no progress. We are taking this very seriously, though."

Clarence thought that she responded to him the same way all of the diplomats talk to each other. "You know that the assassin is still out there. Whoever wanted Dull dead is going to want me dead, don't you think?"

"That is why I am here."

Chapter 22

Crawfordton, Ohio

Inspectors Lynch and Padmore arrived at the farm.

"Holy crap!" Rata said, looking out the back window. "The average height of the postal inspectors went up by two feet!"

"What are you talking about?" Patrick asked, taking a look out the window. "Whoa! He is a big one, and not just because he is next to Lynch."

The inspectors came in and exchanged introductions.

Ty said, "We want to take custody of the prisoner."

"All right," Elijah said. "But when you are done with him, we demand satisfaction, you know."

Ty said, "We won't disappoint you, I'm sure. Um. . . I want to talk to someone in town first. You know. . . before I leave."

"Fine," Elijah said. "There's no hurry. Perhaps Inspector Padmore would like to play a game of chess while you are out."

Padmore said, "I ain't very good. It's been a long time, but I would like to play."

"Excellent. But don't think I will let my guard down."

"I'll be back," Ty said. He went out the door.

Rata said, "Where's he going?"

Patrick said, "Over to the Clinic, I'd bet."

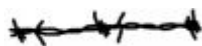
Rata said, "That guy needs to lower his standards in women."

Patrick said, "Is that what you do?"

"At times."

They all got a laugh over that.

"What!?"



Ty walked into the Crawfordton Medical Clinic. Both Tammy White and Aliyah Williams were there.

Tammy said, "Hi Inspector. What can we help you with?"

"I would like to talk to you, Dr. White."

"Are you having a problem?"

"Yes I am. I need some help."

Aliyah said, "Why don't you go back into the office to chat?"

Tammy said, "Oh. . . I . . ."

"I would really appreciate it, Doctor."

"Fine," Tammy said. They went to the office/storage room and shut the door.

"Dr. White, please don't think I am here to ask you out. I gave up on that. I think you are gorgeous and I can't stop looking at you, but I actually have. . .need to ask someone for some advice."

"And you came to me?"

"Yes. Because I think you will tell it to me straight. I guess I kind of forced you into that." Ty looked down and around. "Well, anyways, we got this prisoner, and he told me that I am the same as him."

Tammy said, half joking, "He's not a very tall man?"

"No, no nothing about that. He's a guy who is a terrorist. He said there is no difference in me and him, that if I was born in Homeland, I would be a terrorist too. Oddly enough, I don't know how to answer him."

"So, you are looking for an answer to that?"

"Yes. I have seen a lot of bad in my days, and have had to do some things, but I don't think I am a bad person. But I don't know. . . I mean what if he is right? His words are making me question everything. . .you know?"

"Remember before, when I asked you if you were a Christian?"

"Yes."

"I got from your answer that you are not."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"It can have a lot to do with what you are talking about. When someone becomes a Christian, they read the Bible and their core beliefs change because they want to please God. They take on an entirely different worldview."

"Worldview?"

"Yes. It's the way you look at the world; life; death; possessions; your work; pretty much everything differently if you are a Christian. I can easily believe that if you were born over there in Homeland you would fight for Homeland. Me, on the other hand, I would not live there and fight for a tyrannical system that puts Man above God."

"I still don't see what the difference is."

"If you don't follow God, then how do you determine what is right and wrong? Who is good, and who is bad? Do you go by your feelings? Whatever is convenient? Faithful Christians put the God of the Bible first in their lives. Our God wants us to be free to make our own choices. Will we follow him freely, or reject Him? I know not everyone here is a Christian, but here in the ISA we have the choice. Homeland wants to promise you everything and then you become dependent upon them. The next thing you know, they own you."

"Is that worth fighting a war over?"

"It is when they tell you that Christianity is a hate crime and try to stop us from praying and believing how we want, then they try to force us into participating in things we know God does not want us to do. So yes, each of us has to decide how much of the world's ways we will put up with before we take a stand."

Ty had a blank look on his face.

Tammy said, "In answering your original question, what you are doing, Mr. Lynch, is taking a strong stand, but you do not know why you believe what you say you believe. I think that is why you have some confusion."

"I guess things seem right to me, and I follow it."

". . . But you can't answer why the ISA is more right than Homeland. Christians have the will of God as the basis for their core beliefs."

Then Ty asked, "How do I know that God is real?"

Tammy said, "You were born knowing God is real. It is only when it is convenient that you start to question His existence, right?"

"No. I want to know for sure. I don't want to do things without a reason, or logic. I am not interested in shopping around until I get an answer that sounds good, or making

up my own God in my head. But I need some answers; If God is real, how did he get there?"

"Really? Is that your hang-up? You have to know everything about the Creator of the Universe before you can accept his simple plan of Salvation?"

"What plan?"

"Why would I explain any plan, no matter how simple, if you are unwilling to put any faith in God at all?"

"I guess you're right. I have no faith."

Tammy said, "God made everything. If He made it, He can fix it, right?"

"I guess so. . ."

"Have you ever prayed, Mr. Lynch?"

"Yes. . ." Ty started to get teary eyed. "When I was looking for my small son. But God didn't listen, because I didn't find my son."

"That's terrible. I'm so sorry. Mr. Lynch, are you blaming God for that unfortunate outcome? We often think we know what God should do, even though He is the God and we are just his creation. If you give yourself over to Him, He will then hear your prayers, and he will bless you as He sees fit."

There was a long pause. "So you think I have no faith, right?"

"That's the way I see it. If you need some kind of visual confirmation of God, other than the entire world he created, you cannot become a Christian. You have to have a tiny bit of faith."

"I guess I will leave and come back after I get the faith."

"I don't recommend that. What if something happens to you? You should settle it now, don't you think?"

"I don't know. I mean, I appreciate all that you said, but I am not ready, I guess."

"Well, Mr. Lynch, I hope our discussion helped you somehow. I will pray that you get faith. I have to warn you that God really favors my prayers. Just ask Aliyah."

Ty had a sad, beaten up look on his face. "Um. . .Thank you. Thank you for listening to me. I am leaving now. I probably won't be back." He started to leave.

"Mr. Lynch?"

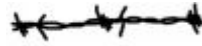
"Yes?"

"Long bones are overrated."

"Huh?"

"It's cool that you are short."

"Oh. . .Yea." He forced a smile as he left. Maybe she thought he wasn't such a bad guy after all.



Ty walked back into the kitchen back at the Farm.

"Hey!" Rata said, "You look tired. You were gone quite awhile. Don't tell me you got lucky with Dr. White."

"Please don't talk about her that way."

"No, man, I was just kidding around."

Ty nodded.

Padmore wanted to change the subject. "The Crawfordton Chess Grand Master just handed me my ass."

Ty nodded again.

Elijah said, "He put up a good fight. It was a good game."

"Not really," Padmore said.

Ty said, "Elijah. Everyone. I really appreciate all that you have done for our Country. I feel like I am leaving home, when I leave here. You guys," he looked at Bella, "you people, are the best." He shook hands with all of them. "Elijah, tell Aliyah and Terri, thank you for everything."

Elijah said, "Come by anytime. I was a complete pleasure having you here."

"Godspeed," Patrick said.

"Thank you."

Rata patted Ty on the back. You're a good guy, Lynch.

Ty nudged Rata on the side. "You too."

Patrick said, "I'll get you the prisoner."

The inspectors stood at the old rusty car and waited for Patrick and the guy they called "Tuya" to come out. Tuya was still throwing the maximum fit whenever he came into contact with any of the jailers. But once he caught a glimpse of the giant Padmore, he became quiet and passive. Padmore got into the back with Tuya and Lynch drove the car away.

Chapter 24

Lake Erie, Aboard the ISS Green Bay

The Admiral took the podium in the Strategy Room. All the top officers in the Fleet were present, and everyone stood at attention with a salute.

The Admiral saluted back. "At ease. Men, we are now at the highest level of alert. The Continental Army is busy right now filling in all the defensive gaps on the line. It has been charged to us, if hostilities break out that we gain total supremacy over Lake Erie, ignoring Canadian boundaries. In other words, this is shaping up to be an all out fight with Homeland, and we are writing off our relationship with Canada once it starts. But absolutely do not fire upon any Canadian vessels unless it is unavoidable in defense. We are counting on them to stand back and watch."

There was murmuring among the officers.

The Admiral continued. "If hostilities commence, we are to insert the Ohio Marines, under Major Crawford, as deep into Homeland as possible." The Admiral looked at Ayanna. "Your job, Major, is to go in and raise as much hell as you can, slowing any Homeland advances, disrupting Homeland supply lines, causing confusion. Search and destroy targets of opportunity. Be prepared to be behind lines for a prolonged period."

Major Ayanna Crawford swallowed hard. "Yes sir." She sat in a row with two Ohio Marine Captains; Shelby, the older veteran, and the recently promoted, Burgess. The Marine Captains both looked at Major Ayanna with concern. Clearly they understood the ramifications of their orders. The Admiral did not say anything about going to a dust off zone for extraction. The whole plan smacked of desperation on the part of the ISA. The brunt of the desperation would be absorbed by the Ohio Marines.

After the briefing, the Marines got up. A sailor in the back of the room said, "I can see why they call that Marine Major 'the Rear Admiral'". Ayanna overheard it, stopped

in her tracks, taking a deep breath and continued on. She did not feel that anything about her or her work was a joke.

Captain Burgess said, "Major."

She turned around. "Yea, Burgess"

Burgess said as quietly and forcefully as possible, "Sir, they are sending us on a suicide mission!"

"So, what is your point?"

"Um. . . That is *bad*?"

"Fair enough," Major Crawford said, "Our job is to make it less bad for our guys on the front lines. We are to soak off a lot of attention. To be the kind of thorn in their side that they will not be able to stand. I get that. God willing, it will be *very bad* for whoever we encounter."

Burgess just stood there.

"Anything else?"

"No, Sir."

"Then let's get back to the *Peninsula Maiden* and wait for our orders."

"Aye, Sir."



Back on the Peninsula Maiden, Major Ayanna Crawford reflected on her life. Why did she grow up with such an interest in the military? Was it her subconscious way of connecting with her adoptive father, Phil Crawford? At every turn in her life she chose either military science, or something like it. Perhaps her fixation on militaria was because of the military men who took custody of her from her family's cannibalistic clan.

Major Crawford was a Christian ever since she was adopted. She knew she had a higher purpose. She knew somehow that it was God's Will that she was to lead men into battle. Would God be so strongly behind something and not bring her through it? Was all of this her imagination? She prayed for God to give her the strength to perform with honor in the coming battle. She was certain the battle was going to take place. Now was her appointed time.

Chapter 25

Northwestern Ohio, Just Off Interstate 75

Lynch and Padmore pulled into the station with their captive. Padmore motioned for Tuya to get out. He awkwardly slid over on the seat as his hands were tied together.

Tuya stopped and stared into the garage. The assailant from Mount Sterling, Kentucky was suspended in mid air, hanging by his hands.

The Chief Inspector greeted them. He looked at Tuya, "Oh, you seem to have some concern over our other guest. You two must know each other Mr. Victor Lazotte."

"How do you know my name?!"

"Oh it was just a crazy guess. Of course it got narrowed down quite a bit once we got a hold of your credit card numbers that you left laying all over the place. Oh that's right, you never thought my man Lynch here would ever find you."

"You still have no proof!"

"The Chief Inspector grabbed the smaller Lazotte around the collar and was almost nose-to-nose. Let me give you some advice, Lazotte. There is not really a lot of mystery surrounding you right now. If you were smart, you will try to get on my good side.' Otherwise, I can serve justice right now."

Lazotte said, "You people are scum! You can't just hold us against our will!"

The Chief said, "I am getting bored already. Padmore!"

"Yea, Chief."

"You think you could put him next to our other guest?"

"No problem."

The Chief said, "Lynch, let's go chat in the office."

"Sure, Chief."

They walked into the office.

The Chief said, "Pull up a chair."

Lynch sat down. "You know, Chief, I got a lot of primo help from some folks in Crawfordton. They made all the difference."

"They have no idea how much difference they can make, one way or the other, I think. Lynch, there is something totally weird going on here."

"When isn't there?"

"Yea. . .but no. As far as I know, these are the only two guys out of over twenty murders who we have caught. And you know what? They are both Canadians."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Dead sure. You got any idea why Homeland would want to, or be able to recruit Canadians?"

"I would have to think about that one. It is a mystery, for sure."

The Chief said, "We have to find out what the common factor is here. Make them slipup and tell us something."

Lynch said, "All I know is that Tuya. . .I mean, Lazotte, is really full of venom. An ideologue of some kind. He hates the ISA."

"So you think he is strictly politically motivated?"

"I would bet on it. What is this other guy's deal?"

"He hasn't said hardly anything. I don't know his deal. We have treated him pretty rough though."

Lynch said, "Maybe let him down awhile, and see if his worldview is different. I'll talk to him."

"Sure, why not?"

The Chief and Lynch went into the garage.

"Padmore," Lynch said.

"Eh?"

"Eh?" Lynch said. "Where did you pick that up at?"

"These guys keep saying it."

"Anyway, you mind getting not-the-Lazotte down?"

"Sure."

"The man captured from Kentucky started spewing F-style speech enhancements, then started speaking in a foreign tongue."

The Chief said, "What did he just say?"

Lynch said, "That wasn't Spanish. That guy must have English as a second language. "

The Chief said, "I have no idea what that was. Hey, Padmore."

"What?"

"Hurt him, will you?"

"Huh?"

"I want to hear some more of that talk."

Padmore twisted his arm. The prisoner screamed nothing audible.

The Chief said, "Nothing that time. Do it again."

Lazotte, who was hanging there screamed, "It's French, you stupid morons! A lot of us speak French in Canada! How stupid are you?!"

The Chief became furious. "I must be really damn dumb as a door knob! Because I don't understand why you could be so wicked as to come all the way down here to shoot unsuspecting mail carriers!"

"The man was conspicuously quiet."

The Chief said, "You don't even know us, you simple idiot! I'll tell you this much, one of you two is going to tell us the story or I'll start maiming and killing you myself." He pulled out his pistol and chambered a round. "Who the hell is first?"

Lynch said, "Chief, just let me talk to this Kentucky guy, Okay?"

"Fine. You do that." The Chief holstered his sidearm.

Ty led the exhausted captive out to the back of the gas station into the over two foot tall growth.

"Please. Let me rest here."

Ty motioned for him to find a resting spot.

The man laid down, holding his shoulders. "You seem like an okay guy; Please. . . I beg you, don't let them hurt me anymore."

Ty said, "You know you could show a little good faith. . ." Ty caught himself using the word 'faith'. "If you would at least state your name."

"My name is Elliot Dionne. Please, Lynch. Tell them I am cooperating. I can't hang there any longer."

"I will tell them that, if you continue."

Dionne said, "They will kill me if I talk."

"We won't." Ty said.

"No, but. . .my leaders will."

Lynch said, "You will have to take that chance, because I promise you, the Chief will only put up with you being quiet a short time, then we will definitely kill you. Do you know Lazotte?"

"Yes. He will never talk. He hates with a hate that confounds me."

"You hate us that much too?"

"No. I just love my Country."

"Canada," Ty said.

Dionne was hesitant to link himself and his actions to Canada for some reason. He didn't say anything.

Ty asked, "Why would Canada start some crap like that with us?"

"No! That is not true! Canada is not the problem!"

Lynch said, "Tell me why I shouldn't have the big boy put you back up to hang for another day or so?"

"It's inhumane."

"You're cracking me up. No really."

Dionne said, "What would I have to do to get amnesty?"

"That may not be possible. In fact, I doubt if you will live long enough to be able to make an elaborate deal if you don't start talking now. You heard the Chief. I promise you, he is not a patient man."

Chapter 26

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Hailey was slouched on a chair next to the front door. She was watching the television across the room. The news was going on about massive numbers of illegal aliens entering Europe to flee the Caliphate from Asia and Africa. Europe had almost completely lost its diverse historical identities. Even now it was an easy decision for the refugees to enter Europe as there was still no major backlash by an unarmed populace.

The phone rang. Clarence felt as if his heart was misfiring. This whole thing had to be bad for his health.

"Harmon here."

"Hi Clancy."

"Hi Bert," Clarence said to General Markle, the National Security Advisor to the ISA President.

"Clancy, there is a chap outside of your room right now, who I want you to let in."

"Hold, please."

Clarence walked over to the peep hole and looked out. There was a brutally ugly man leaning on the opposite wall. His face looked like a topographical map of the Himalayas. He had a long coat on and was definitely someone Clarence would not invite him into his room without anything less than a personal reference from the National Security Advisor.

Clarence told Hailey, "I was told to let this guy in. He is my bodyguard. I still want you to stay." He opened the door. The man walked straight across, looking both ways before entering the room.

"Who are you?" Clarence asked.

The man said, "Go ask your phone," while he was bolting the door shut. He looked at Hailey and took a deep breath.

Clarence picked the phone up again. "Okay. He is in now."

"Good. He is there to protect you. Listen, Clancy, the toothpaste is starting to come out of the tube, you know? The President of Homeland was on the CBC and news channels talking real tough. There is so much saber rattling that something is bound to go wrong."

Clarence said, "Can't we stand down or pull back? What would it hurt?"

"Look, Clancy. If we stand down any further, we will not only be looking soft, but giving up strategic hard points. There is no more standing down. Now word is, that they fired the first shot."

"Yea, I know. That's important."

"You bet it is; and don't forget, we lost a lot of mailmen to these pukes. What is to stop them from doing it again and again?"

Clarence said, "But they lost their warship. . .and helicopter. They may be more conciliatory. Maybe we should offer an olive branch."

"You are a diplomat, so I would expect no less from you. But, no. Final answer. They need to back down. Hey. There is a top secret folder in Dull's suitcase. It still has a seal on it. I didn't want you to get into it, you know, without permission."

"I haven't and won't."

"Good. Don't mess with it. If you would have, it would have been a problem, for the both of us."

Clarence said, "I don't need any more problems, thank you very much. So what do I do?"

"Take your new assistant downstairs and make some kind of statement to the effect that you are taking matters very seriously but do not have all of the information."

"All right."

"You got this?"

"I got it."

"We will be watching on TV. Just act natural."

Clarence hung up the phone and told Hailey "Would you mind guarding the room? We'll be right back."

The chanting outside started again. It was clearly coming from a growing crowd. They would not be congregating if they didn't know someone from the ISA was there.

They walked to the elevator. On the ride down, Clarence asked his escort, "What's your name?"

"Cade."

"Got a last name?"

"Nope."

Clarence was certain that things could not be any more unsettling than right now. What if this new guy, Cade, was someone who was there for some other insidious reason?

The elevator doors opened and the press corps mob immediately recognized Clarence and rushed toward them. Camera flashes made it impossible to see. Acting natural at this point was out of the question. There was so much yelling about ISA Pirates and asking if there was going to be war.

Cade commanded, "Let us off of the damn elevator! Back off!" Even though Cade nudged the press around, they still crowded in.

An attendant dressed in a Hotel staff uniform said, "Mr. Harmon, please come to the podium."

"I can't see or move!"

The attendant led Clarence to the podium. Clarence tried to gain his composure, but his eyes were squinting shut as much as they were open.

The press corps were shouting out crude questions such as "How did you feel when Envoy Dull was shot?"

"Quiet!" Cade shouted. "One at a time! You want to hear or not!"

The podium had all types of microphones attached to it. This was definitely the big time. Clarence could see that the Ottawa Police Department had some officers who were now aggressively trying to keep unauthorized persons out of the hotel lobby. "One at a time, please!" Clarence said, holding up his arms. He pointed at a reporter. "You." To his surprise the room got quiet. This led to a completely different kind of nervousness.

"Can you tell us what happened out on Lake Erie?"

Clarence said, "Shots have been fired at the ISA fleet by the Homeland fleet. There was never any intent by the ISA Navy to fight the Homeland Navy. Nor was there any

intent of navigating into Canadian waters." Clarence pointed at another reporter on the other side of the lobby.

"Why did you shoot back?"

"Our response was made, only because of the Homeland Navy's provocative actions, and the ISA's right to freedom of navigation in our own waters." He pointed at another reporter.

"Was the ISA naval attack in response to the assassination of Envoy Dull?"

"Absolutely not. As I said, we did not initiate the fighting on Lake Erie. Nor do we have any evidence of who killed the Envoy. We would never attack based upon a guess, and we hope that Homeland would never anticipate us behaving that way. Again, we did not order any attack in Lake Erie. We can only hope that someone on the Homeland side may have misread the intent of our movements. These situations can be very touchy when everyone involved feels their lives are on the line. That is all the information that I have on the matter at this juncture."

The reporters kept asking Clarence the same things over and over and Clarence kept repeating that he did not have any other information, or that he couldn't comment on a given topic.

Then Clarence and Cade left for the room. Cade asked the attendant on the way back to have someone bring six full meals up to their room and plenty of drinks.

Chapter 27

Eastern Lake Erie, Disputed Waters

The two fleets gathered together for a standoff again. It seemed inevitable that they would slug it out for round three. The Homeland Fleet included a new participant. An moderately sized, and sleek looking unidentified pre-apocalypse frigate of some sort.

The sun was going down, and the naval game of chicken got much more risky at night. After sunset, the peaceful, calm night was spun into a pyrotechnic display when the Homeland frigate began to spew rockets and smart missiles winding in unexpected trajectories from its deck. The weapons sprayed forth like a fourth of July celebration back when the United States still had birthdays.

The missiles were hitting multiple independent targets in the dark. By the time the ISA realized that Homeland still had at least one good armed modern ship in its navy, all of their capital warships were ablaze and ready to sink, including the flagship ISS Green Bay.

The skipper of the Peninsula Maiden made a straight line to the shore, which was behind enemy lines. The Maiden was being used as a troop carrier, and the skipper wanted to preserve as many of the troops as possible in the event of an all out attack.

Ayanna heard someone say, "fortunately for the Maiden and its crew, they were not worth wasting an expensive irreplaceable smart bomb."

But Major Crawford hastily ordered her Ohio Marines to disembark, and make their way to the shore. This was a routine maneuver because of all the amphibious landing training she had put them through. Once again Major Crawford found her unit in an unfavorable situation; out in the Lake at night. This was another scenario which Ayanna's favorite author, Sun Tzu, would have shrugged his shoulders at. The men tried to grab what gear they could, while the leadership of the Marines was screaming at them to hurry it up.

All of the men had disembarked and were in the deep water trying not to drown. Some were cursing the fact that they had gotten off of the Peninsula Maiden so hastily. In their haste they were unable to keep their radio and maps dry. Some heavy weapons went straight to the bottom.

Then a missile hit the Maiden and it exploded in a deafening flash, killing the entire crew. The Marines made their way up the beach, with the light of the flaming Peninsula Maiden at their backs. After landfall, they began taking positions in the rocks and neither saw nor heard anyone, but Ayanna was sure someone had to be watching.

Major Crawford was stunned at the efficiency of the modern weaponry of the frigate. The entire ISA navy, which now seemed like a joke, was already in shambles. The dragon of death had finished spitting out its destructive fire.

Lights from other Homeland vessels were seen moving toward the burning wrecks. Boat to boat small arms fire could be heard. And they were clearly shooting at any defenseless sailors who were struggling to survive the massacre. Ayanna wondered if she would carry out such an order if she was in the same situation as the cowardly Homeland sailors. So this was it. War in all of its glory.

"Sir," Captain Shelby said, "We better get moving."

"Right," the Major said. "Any ideas where to go?"

Shelby said, "My gut says inland is less busy."

"Agreed. Take everyone in at a deliberate pace; about a klick. If anyone shoots, shoot back."

The sounds of a hundred pairs of boots on pavement was probably enough to keep most of the legally disarmed citizens indoors. There was no shooting. No sign of anyone looking at them.

"Sir," Captain Burgess said, "There is a wooded hill up ahead. Can't see any houses."

Ayanna said, "Let's use that as a base for most of the men. Then we can send out scouts from there."

"Aye, sir."

In about ten minutes, everyone was tucked away in the edge of the woods. Scouting parties were sent out for two klicks in three directions. A scout team that went south came back reporting a main road running through the woods. Another team returned saying "only woods", and another team said, "only houses".

Ayanna said, "Let's head south and hop on the road and go east."

Captain Burgess said, "East, sir? That will take us even farther away from the front."

"That's our mission," Ayanna said.

Burgess said, "Well I figured the mission was scrubbed, with. . . what happened on the Lake, you know."

Major Crawford said, "I think you would have to agree, there is a full blown war going on right now. Are we going to do what we can to win the war, or just give up already?"

"Aye, win the war, sir," Burgess said.

The entire battalion marched east on the road. They scampered off a couple of times when they heard a car approaching. This marching lasted for hours. There was no paper or pencils to draw a map. The road started winding up a steep hill. When they got to the top they could see out on a valley below.

"Oh my God!" Captain Shelby said. "That is beautiful!" Captain Burgess, as well as some of the younger men, had never seen an illuminated town before. They all just stared at its splendor.

Ayanna said, "It is really something. But there is one problem with it."

"Problem?" Burgess asked.

"Yea. It ain't ours. Maybe this would be a good time to start tearing stuff up."

A lieutenant said, "We could knock out the power."

Captain Burgess asked, "How do we do that?"

The lieutenant said, "Knock down wires, shoot transformers."

Major Ayanna said, "That sounds good. That would cause them Homeland Homies some trouble. Send a few teams down there and sabotage whatever you can. We are supposed to draw attention to ourselves. The rest of the unit will R and R up here and think about something a little more strategic that we can do."

Chapter 28

Northwestern Ohio, Just Off Interstate 75

"I hear them coming!" One of the Inspectors declared to the others at the Postal Inspector's Regional Headquarters.

The sound of a hundred bikes, everything from choppers to scooters and everything in between could be heard like thunder from the south.

Everyone from the station was watching and waiting, including Padmore and his tied-up prisoners, who were no longer being suspended from the ceiling.

They came into view. The Inspectors in their long coats, shouldering all types long guns. All wearing heavy boots, various types of goggles and their signature red baseball caps, mostly worn backwards.

Also, the Inspector General's Staff Car, an old rusty Honda CR-V pulled in.

"Hell, this is epic," the Chief said.

The Inspector General got out of the Honda.

"A-ten-shun!" An inspector shouted in their accustomed military fashion. They all stood saluting the older man with an extra long beard.

The Inspector General saluted back. The Chief approached the Inspector General. "Sir. Welcome."

"Chief, I hope you actually have something here. This is a real serious mess."

The Chief said, "We have evidence and suspects in custody."

"That's what I hear. Incredible," the Inspector General said. Let's have a chit chat with them. I have some questions."

The Inspector General and a couple of other high ranking officials, also the Chief, Padmore and Lynch, all went into the office. The behemoth Padmore brought both Dionne and Lazotte with him.

The Chief said, "This pile of documents, maps, were all found on these guys. They are Canadians. This guy, Dionne, was brought here by a Letter Carrier he tried to kill in Kentucky. This other guy, Lazotte, was part of a terror cell that killed a letter carrier here in Ohio.

The Inspector General said, "You boys get that I came all the way from Iowa to learn first-hand what was going on? See all those men out there? We have a lot invested in this."

Lazotte said, "That is unfortunate for you, since I am not going to tell you anything."

The Inspector General strolled up to Lazotte and said, "You're wrong. Oh, you may not talk, but it won't be unfortunate, as you say. At least it will not be the least bit unfortunate for me. My wife is dead, my knees are killing me and my teeth all hurt. Now that is unfortunate. We have all seen nothing but death and destruction for the longest time. That is unfortunate. Seeing the both of you shot and left for the turkey buzzards means absolutely nothing to me."

Lazotte said, "Bite me, fats."

Padmore swung around and put his fist into Lazotte's chest with a deep, painful thud. Lazotte went down, trying to catch his breath.

The Inspector General said, "Inspector, I know you mean well, but that won't be necessary. What about you. . ." he said, looking at Dionne.

"Dionne," the Chief said, reminding the Inspector General of their captive's name.

"What about you Dionne?" the Inspector General asked. "Care to tell me about your exploits in Kentucky?"

"Don't talk!" Lazotte shouted to Dionne, still trying to suck in oxygen.

The Chief said to Lazotte, "He wasn't talking to you!"

Lazotte said, "Blow it out your ass!"

The Inspector General paused and stroked his long beard for a couple of moments. Then he pointed to Lazotte. "Warfield, shoot this sorry excuse of a sick bastard."

Lazotte yelled, "You can't do that! You have no proof!"

Inspector Warfield, himself a big man, hauled Lazotte outside.

The Inspector General said, "It's your turn, Dionne."

"Well. . .I. . ."

"The Chief said to Dionne, "Bear in mind that we have all kinds of proof of your guilt."

The Inspector General said to Dionne, "Not that we really need any proof. Right now, damnit!"

Dionne said, "I want asylum!"

The Inspector General got very close to Dionne. "No politics. No games. No lawyers. The truth. I want it. I want it right now. Do you follow me?"

Dionne was quiet. Then he cringed when the gunshot went off outside behind the building.

Ty thought to himself that at least now Crawfordton would know justice was served as the last of the Crawfordton terror cell was executed. He found himself wanting to go back and tell his friends there.

The Inspector General yawned. "You have until Warfield gets back inside here. No longer."

"Okay! I will tell you! You can't let anything happen to me, or you will lose my help."

The Inspector General said, "You know, I am a really careless old geezer who could accidently do something not in my own best interest. So don't even bother trying to advise me. Oh look! Warfield is back! Don't you think that is great?!"

Dionne said, "Canada wants a war between Homeland and the Independent States."

The inspectors all looked at each other.

The Inspector General looked back at Dionne, and said, "No they don't, you little liar. This is Canada we are talking about here, our brothers to the north, not some 'Crapistan'."

Dionne said, "The Canadian Prime Minister wants a war between your countries."

Padmore shook Dionne by the collar.

"Hold it!" the Chief said. "Let him talk!"

Dionne said, "I didn't want to do it, but I did." Tears started running down his face. "I knew it was wrong. I'm sorry."

The Inspector General said, "So then who's behind all this!?"

"They'll kill me if I talk!"

"I'm gonna count to one. . ." The Inspector General pulled his pistol out of the holster.

Dionne said, "The Canadian Prime Minister is very liberal, eh?"

They all shrugged their shoulders.

"I am not supposed to know this, but he wants Homeland to become so dependent upon Canada that he can annex them into Canada, like he did Alaska. Then he will trump up some charges against the ISA as a pretext to invasion, using mostly Homeland forces. He wants to make a move to control it all."

The Chief said, "That is one stupid crazy story, but it fits, I guess. How do we know that you are not just trying to protect Homeland?"

Dionne thought about it, "You don't, eh?"

"He's telling the truth," Lynch said.

The Inspector General asked, "How's that?"

"I don't think he would implicate Canada, just to get Homeland off of the hook, and still be guilty himself."

The Chief looked at Lynch, "I'll buy that."

Then the Inspector General asked the Chief, "Your radio still working?"

"Yes sir."

"I want to get a message to the President's National Security Advisor. We better get the word out as fast as we can. The fate of our Country depends upon it."

Chapter 29

Adirondack Mountains, Homeland

It was morning behind enemy lines, so the Ohio Marines did not sleep very long, or very well. Their highest expectation for the coming day could only be something remarkably bad.

"Sir!"

Major Ayanna said to the excited Lieutenant, "What is it, Lieutenant?"

"One of the squads, they found something really big."

"That explains why they took so long. What do you mean, 'big'?"

"They found a station that distributes electrical power from Canada into Homeland."

Major Crawford said, "Huh? Did we know they have that?"

"I dunno," the Lieutenant said, "But there is a big sign saying, 'Electrical Power Distribution Center', and there are a lot of cables on towers coming across the border from the north."

All right! Move out! Double-quick!"

The Lieutenant said, "What about the other squad?"

"Everyone on you. If they find out we are around here, they will send a garrison. Time is of the essence. Now move! Right now, damnit!"

The entire unit gathered up their gear and headed out. It was about an eight mile hike, mostly uphill. They eventually made it to the edge of the woods, and in the clearing, could see the station. They looked down at the station from atop of a hill. There were tall towers holding bundles of cables leading into, and coming out of the building. Like the lieutenant said, the towers were stretched out over many miles to the north. There were a couple of Homeland troops outside the main building working on an entrenchment. A troop transport truck was parked outside of the main building.

"Crap! The Lieutenant said. "It was unguarded yesterday. Now there is a garrison there."

Major Crawford said, "They know we are in the area. Get me Captain Burgess and Captain Shelby. ASAP."

The team was assembled deep inside the woods on the other side of the hill.

Major Ayanna said, "Shelby, you secure the east perimeter of the station in those trees with your Company. Burgess, you take your men inside the station. I ain't gonna lie to ya. You will get resistance. We will pay a cost. The rest of us will keep this hill overlooking the station. Shelby and I will use the Station as a fall back point. I don't think I need to explain to anyone how important of a prize this power station is to us. If I were you Burgess, I would follow the same path Shelby takes, then fight your way inside. See if you can get in a back way. No matter what, get in. Clear?"

"Clear, Sir."

Cpt. Shelby took his men around the perimeter of the Station. Their movement was unexpected, and there was no resistance.

Shelby's men secured the woods east of the station with no opposition. No one noticed the troop movement.

Then Burgess and Company made their way close to the Station. Soon the popping of gunfire was heard. Some of Burgess's men were hugging the exterior wall of the Station to avoid getting shot at from the enemy inside the building. ISA Snipers from the hill found and hit targets inside of the windows of the main building and other points throughout the station.

Ayanna winced when she heard some machine gun fire and saw a couple of her men do down. Then they could hear the fighting move to the interior of the building.

The fighting continued, and shots could be heard for what seemed like a half an hour. The Major started to second guess her plan. Should she have given Burgess more help for superior firepower? Or would that be too many unnecessary targets for the Homies?

A second military transport truck pulled up to the front of the station. Homeland troops started to disembark, running towards the skirmish inside of the station.

"Fire!" Ayanna ordered.

A hail of gunfire from the hill and some from Shelby's company interlocked on the would-be reinforcements. The entire platoon of Homelanders had taken casualties. Only a couple of the Homeland reinforcements found a faux refuge inside of the building, only to meet more Ohio Marines under Burgess's command.

Ayanna took a squad with her down to the station to more closely check out the situation. They ran across the exposed open area near the building. The skirmish inside the building had stopped. She had a pit in her gut, thinking that her troops could have been wiped out. She had to step over the corpses of some of her own troops to get inside. Down a hall she observed Burgess Sitting on the floor with his head in his hands.

Ayanna asked him, "How many did we lose?"

Burgess was staring into space. He shook his head; unable to speak.

"Captain Burgess?"

"Ten killed. . . twelve more hurt real bad. If we can't get them to a hospital. . ."

"Captain. You know where the hospital is?"

"No sir."

"I order you to help save those men's lives. Right now. Understood?"

"Yes sir."

Major Ayanna concealed her thoughts over the dismal situation and patted Burgess on the back. "You did a great thing here. But now you have to soldier up, Burgess. There are lots more of them on the way, and sooner rather than later. We haven't seen anything yet."

"Yes, sir."

The Major said, Shelby, you go back and hold that perimeter in the woods. They will probably come your way, and in force. Send out scout teams to watch the approaches. Burgess, make as many hard points inside the building as you can. Gather up weapons and ammo. We will hold on to that hill as long as we can, but will fall back here with you."

"Sir," Shelby said, "What if they have another helicopter or something like that?"

"I don't know, Shelby. Just pray that they don't. But don't forget, the safest place we have is that station. They really don't want anything to happen to it. I hope."

Chapter 30

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Back at the hotel room, the phone tweeted. "Harmon here."

"Clancy, this is Bert. Hand the phone over to Cade, please."

Clarence complied.

"Cade, here. Okay. I'll tell him. Yep. No problem." He hung up the phone and looked at Clarence. "You're supposed to read that top secret file in Dull's suitcase now. He's going to call back in an hour."

Clarence said, "Oh that's great. They have to tell you that I am supposed to read it. That way you know I have permission, right? What would you do to me if I had read it without you knowing I had permission?"

Cade said, "That didn't happen."

Clarence sighed. "Hand it over."

Cade pulled the folder out and Clarence jerked it out of his hand. He broke the seal and opened the "Top Secret". "Classified" folder.

It was authored by some analyst back in Iowa. "Canadian Liberal Government Enmity with ISA." Reading through the text, there was a whole list of charges, implicating Canada. Supplying clans within the ISA with weapons; Sabotage that included crop destruction and food poisoning; Assassination; Falsification of reports to ISA allies; Spies caught trying to uncover ISA military weaknesses. The risk factor and reliability of claims were all rated as "low". Clarence thought about Hailey. She was such a sweet looking thing. Was she really there to protect him? Or perhaps she was there to monitor his every move and follow his every word. It seemed likely that she had no idea what some of the scoundrels in her country were up to. He was thinking about dismissing her. Clarence told Cade, "I would tell you what's in here, but then I'd have to kill you."

"Tee hee," he said. "That's your call. It might be a good idea to let me know who I am protecting you from though."

"Probably everyone."

Cade sat on his bed looking at him. Then he looked at Hailey. His eyes blinked rapidly indicating some impatience.

"What?" she asked.

Clarence said, "Actually, this could turn into a great big massive nightmare."

Cade said, "Obviously. Why do you think I am here?"

The phone rang again. Cade picked it up. "It's for you."

"What?"

"Clancy, this is . . ."

"What, Bert?"

"Things are getting hairy. Canada is pressuring us, talking about joining Homeland in a war. Homeland has got the materiel to breakthrough on the front. The fact of the matter is, that our intel is so weak we don't really know what they have. They could have a company of M1 Tanks as far as we know. Now Homeland claims that we have terrorists holding their electrical power plant hostage. It must be true, because I think the power plant occupation is the only thing keeping them from invading us right now. Of course, Texas wants to know what is going on."

Clarence said, "So what do you want me to do about all of it?"

"Get the ball rolling on some peace talks."

"On the basis of what?"

"Our surrender."

"What?! This makes no sense at all. We need more information before we can do anything!"

"We're going to have to make some concessions. They are all going to call the shots. We are the odd man out. After all of these years of confrontation, things are finally all lined up against us."

"I'll quit this damn job before I do that! Screw that! You need some kind of a wimp up here for this! Not me! I am not going to be 'the guy' who surrendered to Canada!"

"Clancy, look; we need you there to get us the most favorable deal we can get. No one else can do better than you."

"I am not giving one single thing up. We are talking about our survival as a country here!"

General Markle said, "You don't set policy! You follow it! Now. . ." Markle regained his composure. "Clancy, I know you. You will do the right thing. I know you are in a tough spot right now. We are counting on you."

Clarence said, "Here is what I will do, I will tell Homeland and Canada that we want to talk. That's it."

"Fine. That will work for now, but we will be in touch." The General abruptly hung up the phone.

Clarence started working on a situation analysis to get the whole diplomatic mess clear in his head.

There was a knock on the door. Hailey looked through the peephole. "Dinner time," she said. Then she opened the door.

"I'm starving," Clarence said.

A fairly old looking delivery man in tight clothes stepped into the room pushing a cart. "I'll just go ahead and put this food over by your table."

Hailey said, "You can just leave it here, I got it."

"Oh, but please. . ." Then the man bent low behind the cart and rammed it into her with a crash, knocking her back. She almost fell to the floor, but put her hand out on the bed to stop her fall. The bellhop threw off a towel that was covering a pistol that he had hidden on a platter. He picked up the gun and quickly brought it up to fire at Clarence. Before he could fire, Cade reached for his gun and shot at the assailant, but missed the mark, because Hailey was too close to being in his line of fire. The man ducked and ran out of the room without getting off a shot. Cade still couldn't get off a second shot and chased after him. Hailey regained the momentary loss of her balance and followed as well. Clarence got up and shut the door. Then he called the Ottawa Police Department.

Cade saw the man running down the main hall of the third floor to the door that led to a stairway. He told Hailey, "Take the elevator! Ground floor!"

Hailey shouted, "Everyone stay in your rooms!"

Cade ran to the end of the hallway. He paused long enough to hear echoing footsteps going down the uncarpeted stairs. Then he opened the door. As the door opened, he heard the footsteps stop. The man must have gotten to the ground floor, but

the number of steps he heard didn't add up. Maybe the assailant was stealthy. Cade quickly ran down the first flight of stairs and was surprised when he was shot at, so he dropped to a prone position. Although he was no longer an easy target, he couldn't see anything, so he slowly raised up.

Then he heard the door below to the second floor open. It did not shut right away because it had one of those very slow, heavy actuators. He kept his pistol in front of him and raced down the stairs hoping the gunman was not savvy enough to set a trap for him, or to fake going to the second floor and instead going to the ground floor ready to shoot upwards. He saw the door shut. Cade knew any wrong move could be his last. He also knew that catching this guy, preferably alive, was extremely important. But dead was also an acceptable consolation prize.

Cade quickly opened the door to the second floor and went through it. The guy was running full tilt down the hall at the other end of the building. Cade managed to get a couple of long range shots off.

Cade wasn't sure if he hit the guy or not, but he resumed the chase. There was no obvious blood on the red carpeting. Then Cade realized that the would-be assassin was heading for the parking garage. But first he stopped to shoot back at Cade.

Cade ducked and weaved. He was not hit. But he kept going, targeting the position where the guy was last seen, waiting for him to provide a momentary target. The fake bellhop did not appear. The only other place he could have went, was into the parking garage, so Cade followed.

The garage was about half full of cars. Every car represented an ambush point. Cade crouched down to look under the cars for a pair of feet sneaking around. He could hear sirens in the distance, but whatever happened here would probably be over by the time they showed up. The police were on their way, because they either heard the shooting or Hailey Martin had someone else alert them. Cade was confident that his tactic of inspecting under the vehicles would detect the culprit if he was there, while keeping himself low.

Convinced that the attacker was not on Level 2, he made his way to the ramp down to the first level. Just then he heard shots being fired on Level 1. He went prone on the ramp, taking cover behind the side rail. But then he heard different sounding shots from another direction.

Cade figured he was in big trouble. Two attackers from different angles had him pinned down, and he didn't know the location of either of them. Then he heard a woman's voice as if she was taking a beating. He looked and saw Hailey laying on the floor in the main aisle. Cade ran out to Hailey's aid, fully expecting to draw gunfire.

Instead, a van pulled out from the other end of the garage with the engine revved wide open. It would only be a few seconds until it was upon them. Cade drug Hailey's body off to the side with one arm and unloaded about ten shots into the van's windshield with the other.

The van raced past them, and Cade instinctively looked for the license plate number, but the plate was removed. The van went down another ramp, crashing into the gate and out to the street, scattering some protesters and pulling away. Cade couldn't understand how he missed the driver. He looked at Hailey. She was shot in her side. He said, "He's gone. I'm going to get you some help."

"It really hurts. I'm sorry, I . . . I let him get away."

"No. You did good. Don't worry." Within a few minutes police and an ambulance showed up. After they picked up Hailey, Cade looked at the blood on the floor. It looked like a lot of blood. They always say blood looks like a lot more than it really is. Nevertheless, it looked like a lot of blood.

Chapter 31

Northwestern Ohio, Just Off Interstate 75

Later in the day, Postal Inspectors from many parts of the ISA were assembled in one location and at one time. They all saluted the Inspector General.

"Men, I called for this meeting because of the grave situation that we face. The existence of our Country is at stake. We have been trying to find out who has been attacking our mail carriers. Because of what some did, we now know who it is behind this. Our enemy is Canada, or more specifically, their cowardly lowlife Prime Minister. Don't forget, we have had our own outlaw presidents in our history as well. But here is the main problem; Our own leadership in Iowa does not believe that we can prove Canada is trying to start a war between us and Homeland."

There was a lot of murmuring throughout the assembly.

The Inspector General Continued, "Let me remind you; you all said the Postal Inspector's Credo when you joined the force. *'Our Country survives because the Postal Inspectors of the Independent States will never cease until justice is served on any who threaten the delivery of the mail.'* The oath is real simple to say, but now it is not so simple to uphold. But as God is my witness, We will serve justice, and we will fulfill our oath!"

The listeners were confused about how they would serve any justice, yet hopeful there was a plan that was not suicidal.

"So you may be asking yourself right now, what can we do?"

The Inspector General looked at Dionne, "Tomorrow, we are all going to go to Canada, and this Canadian terrorist here is going to tell everything he knows about their crimes to the Canadian Press!"

Some agreement from the crowd was cautiously coming forth.

"So everyone rest up. Tomorrow we will ride north to Windsor, Ontario, which means we will have to go through Detroit."

Moans came from the assembly.

Ty Lynch told the Chief, "Did he say 'Detroit'? Sir, I have assets in Crawfordton who may be of help to us. Permission to go to Crawfordton."

"You did mention something about a Detroit Cop. Just make sure that you are back in time. We need everyone for this."

Ty asked, "Can I take your car?"

"Oh. . .All right. You haven't let me down so far. You must be back before first light. And watch the potholes!"

"Yes, sir."

Ty hopped into the car and got onto the empty, bumpy highway. It had been a long time since he had operated an automobile. It felt liberating to travel such a distance so quickly, yet in such comfort.

While on the way to Crawfordton, he thought about the prospects of going into the Detroit wasteland the next day. There had to be a better way to get to Canada than, straight up the gut, through Detroit. But any voyage across Lake Erie would be a certain disaster. Canada was always on the lookout for illegal aliens.

Whoever was left at the top of the food chain in these burned out metropolitan areas were typically as vile as the extent of one's imagination. The thought of a journey through Detroit sent shivers up Ty's back. Would he still be alive at this same time tomorrow?

Ty wanted to talk to Tammy again. What would be the justification for all of them to practically throw away their lives? If the Chief knew he was stopping in Crawfordton for something personal, he would be furious. Forget it. This was serious business, too serious for personal considerations. All of this reasoning was for naught, because when he got to the tiny burg that seemed like home, and got out of the car, his feet took him directly to the Clinic.

He walked in. Dr. White was at the desk facing the opposite direction, sitting next to a white mother with a weird haircut who was holding a darker skinned baby with a matching hairdo. Dr. Mitch Braun was looking through their medicine. Mitch said, "Hi, Ty. Excuse me, I gotta run."

Tammy said to the woman, "Do you keep a calendar, Jackie?"

"I can."

"Everything checks out. Bring her back in a month. I've never seen a better looking baby, honestly." the Doctor stroked the little girl's Mohawk hairdo.

"Oh thank you."

"Say 'hi' to Carlos for me."

"All right." Then the mother left with her chubby baby.

Tammy turned around, "Ty. I'm a little surprised to see you again already. What brings you back here?"

"Dr. White, I . . . I am scared. Scared into having faith. I know that I can't be tough enough for everything, and in control of everything, no matter what. I want to know God's simple Plan of Salvation that you talked about."

Tammy said, "I believe you, Ty. Now you have me concerned about everything that is going on with you, but you need to focus on the spiritual side of things, once and for all."

"I know. No more stalling. I don't want to face tomorrow without God."

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou will be saved."

"Huh?"

"That's it. That's the Plan."

"It is?"

"Believe that Jesus, who came to Earth as a Man, and yet was also God's Son, died for your sins."

"Is that what the Bible says?"

"Yes."

"What if I have sinned too much?"

"All have sinned, and come short of the Glory of God."

"That didn't help."

Tammy said, "In other words, *everyone* has sinned too much, because God cannot allow the guilt of even one sin into His Heaven. Jesus lived a life free of sin and was God, so His payment on the Cross will cover your sins, if you accept his payment and follow Him."

"I will," Ty said. "I accept his payment for my sin. I want to follow. . ."

"Don't tell me. Tell Him."

"It all seems a little strange, you know, a little. . . weird somehow. How do I know He will hear me?"

"Faith!"

"Oh yeah. That." Ty put his hands on the desk and went to his knees. He prayed, "God, I choose to believe in You, even though I don't have much faith. I believe in your Son, that He is able to pay for my sin. Please save me, even though I am no good, so I can go to your Heaven with you." He looked up at Tammy as if to ask if that prayer was adequate with tears running down his face.

Tammy hugged him from her chair. "That was wonderful, Ty. "

"That's it?" Ty stood up and wiped tears from his eyes.

Tammy said, "You talk like it is too simple, but look how long it took you to do it."

"I know. Thank you, Doctor."

"Tammy," she said.

"Okay. Tammy." He tried to smile. " I seriously gotta run."

"First," She said, "you are going to take this Bible with you, so you can get started on learning more."

"Thank you Doctor. . .Tammy. I'll treasure it always."

"Just promise me you will read it."

"Okay. I promise I will read some every day."

"Godspeed, Inspector. It takes a real man to do what you did."

"Thank you," Ty said. "That means a lot, coming from you."

"Let me know how things are going sometime, Okay?"

Ty nodded and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Then he left the Clinic.

Next Ty showed up at the farm. He knocked on the back door. Rata opened the door. "Hey man, come in. Damn! You look beat up again. You gotta quit going over there and seeing Dr. White, man. Are you some kind of pain seeker, or what?"

Ty said, "Can you get Elijah? I want to ask you and him a question."

"Okay, what about Patrick?"

"Just you two."

"Hang on. Let me get him."

"Inspector!" Elijah said. "How the hell are you?"

"I have mixed feelings, but thanks. I want to know if you two will go to Detroit with a large squadron of Inspectors tomorrow. You could serve as guides."

"Damn!" Rata said, "Are you guys going to try to take it over, or what?"

"No. We just want to cross the bridge over into Canada."

Elijah said, "I'm not sure Canada is going to permit that."

"We are going anyhow."

They both watched Rata walk out of the room. They looked at each other waiting for an explanation for his exit.

"Why would you want to go there?" Elijah asked.

"I can explain tomorrow."

Elijah said, "Man! I don't know. I have had bad dreams about that place ever since we left. I'd like to weigh the cost and the benefit before I go doing something wild like that. I don't want to end up like Henry Miller. Dr. Williams would have an absolute meltdown if I told here where I was going back there. Maybe I really am too old for that sort of thing."

Ty proceeded to tell Elijah the entire back story of the two Canadian captives, including Lazotte's execution. When he got to the end of the story, Rata appeared around the corner.

Rata was wearing his black and red Latin Mafia "uniform" complete with the hat and gold chains. "I got this, Vato," he told Elijah. "I can go up. You don't need to go."

Elijah said, "Damn! Look at all that bling!"

Rata said, "Yea, I was supposed to donate it for weapons, but I stuck it in my pocket instead. They sure as hell would have shot me if they realized that I did that."

Ty said, "You look kind of. . ."

"Badass," Rata said. "Yea, I know."

Chapter 32

Adirondack Mountains, Homeland

It was quiet in the early morning. Birds were chirping. The insects were chirping their mating calls. Warfare is mostly boredom. But sometimes the boredom turns into pure horror.

Gunfire erupted to the east of the power station. Major Ayanna Crawford said from the top of the hill to the west of the station, "Sounds like a small engagement. Everyone holds for now."

Then there was gunfire to the west of the hill. Bullets were heard buzzing overhead. A Lieutenant said, "We're surrounded, Sir!"

"Hold at the top of the hill." She commanded in a quiet voice. There were no sounds of any vehicles or aircraft. But it had to be just a matter of time until something really bad came into the scene.

ISA scout patrols were returning to the position on the hill. They were dragging along a few wounded. They said they lost two Marines in the contact.

"They're coming up the hill, sir!"

"Hold your fire. Everyone get quiet."

Snipers were finding and dispatching the occasional long range target near the power plant, which was a 180 degrees in the opposite direction. Ayanna worried that the enemy was either sneaking their way past Shelby's Company, or fighting their way past them.

The force sneaking up the hill from the west opened up on Ayanna's group. They took some casualties.

"Fire Back!" she ordered.

They were clearly outgunned. A Homeland medium machine gun was ripping apart trees near them.

Then the shooting became more intense. Ayanna was considering pulling back to the station, a tactic which would amount to a maneuver of desperation. Then she

realized most of the bullets were no longer coming in their direction. Not long after that, the shooting from the west stopped altogether. The skirmish to the east still raged.

"Sir! They're waving a white flag on the west!" someone said.

"We are not surrendering! Period! Nuts!"

A soldier said, "They are still coming with a white flag! What should I do?"

A man came within view. He was in plainclothes. "Don't shoot!"

"Who are you!?" Ayanna asked.

"Seaman Nelson, ISS Compassion."

"No way!" she said.

"Yes way."

"What are you doing here?"

"Permission to approach. I am armed."

"Granted. We're a little busy here, so get straight to the point."

"I was on a spy ship that got rammed by a Homeland warship. I think I was the only one who made it to shore. I am with an underground revolutionary militia. That is who just routed those Homelander at the bottom of this hill who attacked you."

"You joining us, or staying with them?"

"I'll fight with them, if you permit."

"Give them our regards." Ayanna kept looking over her shoulder at the situation at the station. "What kind of numbers do they, or Homeland have here?"

"All that is a fog," Nelson said. "Sometimes we win, sometimes they win. It just goes on and on."

Major Ayanna asked, "So how did you know we were here?"

"It's all over TV."

"TV?" Ayanna had only remembered watching TV when her adoptive father ran a DVD player on solar power a couple of times.

"Everyone knows what is going on here."

"Including back home? I mean, headquarters?"

"I suppose so. The TV people are calling you terrorists."

"What!?"

"People all over Canada and Homeland are watching. They say you are threatening to destroy the station."

"We are," she said. "That would help our cause. Electrification deprivation to the Enemy."

"Maybe," Nelson said.

"Maybe what, Nelson?!"

"Depends on what is being reported on TV."

"I don't know anything about TV. All I know is we are still fighting a battle here, and I can't even hear my own thoughts right now."

"Not for long."

"Oh?"

"The militia is going to outflank those near the station in a few minutes. I think."

"You think we can win there?"

Nelson smirked. "I do know there are a lot of friendlies over there. So many people hate the government here, and hid weapons from them. I am surprised Homeland hasn't broken up already. They say the New Hampshire area is really out of control. There are guys from all around here who didn't buy the propaganda on TV and figured out what was really going on, so they want to help."

Major Crawford said, "I didn't see any of this coming."

Sir, "I recommend that you not destroy the power plant."

"Our job is to soak off attacks. As long as we can do it here we may as well continue."

Then the shooting to the north of the station intensified. They observed Homeland troops disengaging, being chased by a large group of civilians.

"They'll be back; for sure," the Major said. "I know they will have some kinda sick killing thing that they will bring. We don't have adequate intel for this operation. This is no way to fight a war. If you can't fight unfair, then don't fight."

Chapter 33

Outskirts of Detroit, Michigan

Inspector Warfield drove the staff car with the Inspector General riding shotgun; Literally and figuratively. In the back, Dionne sat behind Warfield and Rata, the urban scout, was on the other side. Scores of motorcycles with well armed riders were following the staff car.

The Inspector General said, "With all of this firepower, no one will stop us."

Rata said, "We will all get shot up."

The Inspector General said, "You're crazy. We are fast on these bikes. They can't defend everything in that whole area."

Rata said, "They couldn't put up a machine gun on the Ambassador Bridge and waste us all at one time?"

"They wouldn't dare try it!"

Rata started laughing.

"What!?"

"Hell, it ain't goin' down like that. You better let me handle it."

"Handle what?"

"Dude, you are goin' to a foreign country."

"They are part of the ISA, just like us. They are under our control."

Rata laughed again. "They ain't under anyone's control, but their own. You want Dionne on TV in Canada, right?"

"That's the goal."

"Then you should listen," Rata said. "How much money you got?"

"Money?"

"Dude, why do you keep repeating everything I say? It is getting a little annoying, you know?"

The Inspector General said, "Who do you think is in charge here?!"

Rata said, "Someone with a bad case of recto-cranial inversion."

"Huh? Okay, smart-ass, we'll try it your way," the Postal Inspector General said. "I must be crazy for listening to you."

Soon they reached a checkpoint. A few nervous guards were pointing rifles at the large motorcycle company. "Hold it right there!" one of them said.

Rata got out of the car. He casually walked up to the guards, holding up open hands. "Hey man, I ain't packin', okay? We're here on business."

"Get out! Now!" the guard said. "We'll fight you. We have lots of weapons."

Rata said, "What the hell? Did I disrespect you? Huh?!"

"No. Who are you, anyhow?" the guard asked.

"Can't you tell by my colors? I'm Latin Mafia."

"Latin Mafia? Never heard of it."

An older guard said, "I did. I heard they left town right away because they are a bunch of whiney women."

Rata said, "You are pissing me off. I never disrespected you, and you are callin us whiney women? What the hell is up with that?"

The guard lowered his weapon and the others followed suit. "Look, we are not trying to start something, but you can't be bringin' all those bikers in here. You looking for a war?"

"All right. Dude, I get what you are saying, but that is not what I am trying to do. Did I say I want to bring everyone through here?"

The guards did not respond to the rhetorical question.

"We want to talk to the big pants, you know?"

"You mean the King?"

Rata said, "Whatever you want to call him, I guess."

"He is the King of the Thumb."

"What Thumb?"

"The Thumb of Michigan. From Detroit, all the way to Flint, and Bay City."

"Oh, *that* thumb. We just want to make a deal."

"All right. Why didn't you say so?"

"I thought it was obvious."

"Usually, our trading partners don't bring a whole army here."

"No, man. These are just my personal body guards, okay?"

"You buying or selling?"

"No, man. We just want to pass through."

"Fine," one of them said, "I'll let them know you are here."

Rata said, "Don't even, like, come back and say that they don't want to see us, because that is unacceptable. Get it?"

The guard ignored the comment.

Rata went back to the Honda CR-V staff car and told the Inspector General that the guard would be back with permission to enter.

"What is wrong with you?!" the Inspector General said, "they will come back with an army!"

Rata said, "So? You were going to barrel through them all anyhow. How is that smarter than just fighting them all here?"

"At least that way they couldn't kill us all!"

Rata said, "Then the other half of us would be dead on the way back. Besides, they only need to kill one guy. If they kill that little Canuck in the back seat there, then your whole mission is in the toilet. Dude, you are really not a military strategist. Maybe you should go back to delivering the mail. You really could use the exercise anyhow."

"Warfield," the Inspector General said, "tell the men to get ready for a fight."

Rata shook his head. "Is that all you people know, is violence?"

"That's all those gang types understand!"

After a short wait, the guard came back. "I need one of you to come with me."

"No problem," Rata said. "We only need passage for two. Might as well take us now."

The guard nodded.

Rata walked up to the car. "I'm going to go with them, and take Dionne."

"You're crazy!" the Inspector General said.

"I may be crazy, but I know what I'm doing."

"You are going to get our only prisoner killed! This is our only chance!"

Rata said, "I heard someone shot Lazotte. Who was it? Not me."

"I don't like it." Then the Inspector General turned around and looked at Dionne, and said, "All right. Go ahead. You better deliver, or I swear. . ."

Dionne got out of the car. And walked up with Rata to the guards.

"Turn around!" One of the guards said, and started frisking them.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" Rata said. "Ain't you gonna take me to dinner and a movie first?"

Then the guard put a blindfold on them. When he finished, he told them, "Okay, walk straight ahead."

Rata tried to measure his footsteps. He was told to turn left, then walked awhile. Then the guard spun them around a few times to confuse their sense of direction. They turned several times and walked a few more minutes. Then they were told to remove their blindfolds.

They entered a ramshackle building that looked as if it was not being lived in. It was evident that the building was used as a temporary meeting place to confuse their not so trustworthy visitors. There were several armed men there standing and staring.

A tall blonde haired man came in and said with a heavy Slavic accent, "Vat is all of da motorcycles for?"

"Those are my homies," Rata said. "Hey man. You seem a little familiar to me."

"Ain't you one of dose Latin Mafias?"

"Yea. I ought to know you."

"Maybe because you spend hundreds of thousand of dollar wis me."

Rata said, "Hey! You are Andy!" Rata recognized "Andy" or Andriy Miroshnychenko, the Ukrainian weapons dealer from his early days.

"Yah, dat is right. I tink maybe. . . I do know you. I remember you, Rat or Mouse or some-ting.

"Yeah, I'm La Rata!"

Andriy said, "You was pretty good negotiator, no?"

"Thank you, your highness. You were always the best, man. I probably would be dead if it wasn't for you."

Andriy laughed off the compliment. "If you need job, you come back here, okay?"

Rata said, "Thank you. I will remember that. Thank you. Looks like you bought a country. So you are the 'King of the Thumb' now?"

"Oh yah. Dat is vat dey call me. I jus' keep buyink und buyink wiss too much profits. Ven my customers vant to kill each other, I make so much money. Ve are da Tumb Kingdom, you know? Vat are you doing wiss so many bikers?"

"Dere. . .They're Postal Inspectors, King." Rata said.

"Dey vant to buy weapons, or dey here for trouble?"

"No trouble. Maybe buy later. Right now they want to get this guy over to Canada, so he can spill his guts."

"English please," Andriy said. "I don't know gut spillink. You mean open like rabbit?"

"No, we want him to tell what he knows on TV."

"People do dat?" Andriy started laughing. "Vat dus he know?"

"Him and his pals killed a lot of Postal workers."

"Oh. Maybe not so good, dis guy. Well, he probably had his reasons."

Rata blew off the weird comment. "Will you let us go there?"

"No problem. 'Big Ugly' over dere drive you two at da bridge. No bikers."

"Got it," Rata said. "Thank you so much, King Andy."

"Let's go," Big Ugly said. He took them outside to a car and drove through Detroit, the capitol of the Thumb Kingdom. Travelling through the Kingdom they looked at the sights. There were small garden plots where residential city blocks had been razed. There was a lot of lush green everywhere, including on top of many of the buildings.

Children were happily playing outside. Rata had never imagined that his hometown would be so peaceful and tranquil. And sparsely populated. Occasionally they passed a patrolman dressed in Army fatigues carrying some nasty looking machinegun.

"Hey Big," Rata said, "Do people like it here?"

"Of course. What is not to like? King Andy buys us a lot of stuff. We just help him with business, which is very very good." Big Ugly started laughing.

"What about all the gangs?"

"Those idiots almost all killed each other off, and then Andy hired the rest for his Guard. This is a good Country for us. We don't want to be part of no ISA or Canada."

Rata took his gang colored hat off and stuffed it into his shirt, along with all of his gold chain.

Dionne asked, "Can I come here to live?"

Big Ugly said, "Yeah, but you gotta work."

"I can work," he said.

"I'm serious. No depending on somebody else. Everybody works, you know? Another thing, if you do the crime, you put on the show." Big Ugly started laughing loudly.

Rata wondered what 'the show' was, but let the topic go. He said, "Look, Dionne. If you get your message out, you can come back here and live happily ever after, okay? I will 'forget' to bring you back. If you screw up, well, you better not."

"No! No! I will do what you want! Leave me come back here to stay!"

Big Ugly said, "When you get to the border, and they ask you your name, tell them 'Chiang'."

Rata said, "Chiang? I don't look Chinese."

"So? Just do it."

Chapter 34

Adirondack Mountains, Homeland

A lieutenant told Major Crawford, "They probably will hit us again tonight."

Just then the whistling of incoming projectiles could be heard. Explosions hit the ground to the east of the power station where Captain Shelby's Company was positioned. The explosions were not nearly as loud as a regular mortar round, which Ayanna had remembered from her childhood.

The Major observed as much as she could through her field glasses from atop of the hill. "They're using mortar smoke rounds. That means they're moving in." Then she saw several men move around to the front of the building, driven to their knees by violent coughing, then collapsing, motionless. The only way such coughing could be stopped so suddenly was by their deaths. "Those bastards are using poison gas on us!"

"What do we do, Sir!?"

She saw that the wind was unpredictable in the hilly area. "We move out. Stay out of that gas. Stay in the woods. They definitely know we are here. Let's go down and set up a some hit and runs on them to keep them off balance. Make sure we correctly ID Homies from the friendly militia. Let's split up the platoons. Move out!"

Ayanna and her Marine Company made their way down the hill and encountered no opposition. They heard the BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! of a mortar barrage of poison gas landed on top of the hill they had just left.

She motioned for two platoons to go wide around the imminent Homeland attack. The Major was now with a single platoon. They crept through a section of the woods that was planted with pine trees. The floor of the woods was a soft bed of pine needles and could be walked through quietly as long as old brittle sticks hanging down and laying on the woodland floor were avoided.

The point man put up his hand and crouched down. Homeland troops were confidently walking through the woods as if they were casually mushroom hunting. Ayanna and the Marine platoon took aim. As soon as Ayanna fired, dropping an enemy combatant, the others immediately fired.

The platoon had practiced it hundreds of times under the Major's strict supervision. Each Marine fires a couple of shots and then they all run in the direction of

another Marine Platoon before the numerically larger enemy force could find them.

As planned, most of the Homelander's chased them through the woods, killing a single Marine. Then another Marine platoon laying in wait, fired on the pursuing Homelander's, dropping many of them. This time the degraded Homelander's knew better than to chase the second time.

While out in the woods, Ayanna could hear that a vicious firefight was going on at the station. She recognized the sound of slower cycling AK rifles with their distinct sound. Since the Homelander's carried AR-15s she knew the militia was coming to their aid. The three Marine platoons of her company rallied and started to move toward the fight. They made contact and the entire Company was pinned down.

Ayanna heard some orders being barked out from the enemy's side. She took a peek and saw the Homelander's charging into their position.

"Fire! Fire!" The shooting resulted in several Homeland casualties but eventually some reached the Marine's pinned down position. Ayanna fired at multiple targets who advanced to point-blank range. Then, when her rifle became empty, she switched to her pistol. She was oblivious to what the rest of her Company was doing. She tried to take as many out as possible, forestalling hand to hand combat.

The enemy kept coming and coming. They were starting to overrun her men. She knew that many of their own had to be either dead or dying. Her pistol had run out of ammunition so she threw it at one of the charging foes, causing a yelp out of him. The enraged attacker with a diabolical facial expression was upon her. She pulled a combat knife out of its sheath and put a deadly slash across the man's throat. He went down. There was no time to recover as another assailant from behind her picked up a huge tree branch and swung it at her. It hit Ayanna on the arm, causing the knife to fly out of her hand, and a great deal of pain that she would wait until later to feel. The man was then surprised when she buried her knee into his midsection, then her elbow into his upper back. Then she finished him off with the other knee and elbow.

Another attacker grabbed her from behind and drove her to the ground, landing on her. He held her down and reached down to pull out his combat knife.

Ayanna realized the knife she dropped was out of reach. It occurred to her that this moment was quite a bit like the time she shot at a wild boar and Phil Crawford had to shoot it for her because she lost her nerve. But Phil was not here this time. Ayanna's life was in the hands of a much stronger adversary who had better position on her and had a weapon while she didn't. She could no longer reach for another weapon since she needed both hands to keep the unnecessarily long knife from being embedded into her throat.

She quit flailing her legs. The attacker took that as a sign of resignation that she was ready to die. He smiled. Then she did the something the attacker would have never expected. She took one of her hands and pushed the very end of the long knife on the flat side, the leverage caused a moderate cut on her hand, but the knife was now pointing away from her and his hands, both still holding the knife were on her neck. The attacker was surprised by the turn of events. As he shifted his weight to try and point the knife at her again, she bit him viciously and deeply on the forearm, then she rolled him off of her. She was the first to get up, and kicked at the knife, but missed. The man laughed it off. Ayanna found her knife on the ground, picked it up and was back in business. One of her troops tried to shoot the bitten opponent in the back, but instead was shot himself by a Homelander. The shooting was still taking place all around them. That ISA shooter was in turn assaulted. Ayanna didn't want any more of the hand to hand combat with the guy, so she took her chances and threw her knife the way she did when since she was a child.

Amy Crawford always told her when she was a kid that this was going to happen, and finally it did. She put the guy's eye out with her knife. His body reacted with violent tremors.

Without taking an instant to admire her handiwork, she looked for, and found a gun. She remembered her own orders to retreat to the power station. Bodies from both sides were scattered everywhere. While running, she was being shot at, and shot back into the general direction without a target.

On the way back to the power station, she saw more of her men. An entire squad had been killed by the unknown gas. One soldier was holding both of his hands to his throat. There were burn marks all over his face and hands. His mouth and eyes were both wide open.

Chapter 35

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Clarence knew his life was still in grave danger. They tried to switch rooms to possibly confuse their enemies. The hotel front desk said they would "work on it".

Clarence wanted to convince himself that Cade alone would somehow be able stop any intruders. He had put in another request with the RMCP for another guard. They

reminded him that there was one less officer available, now that Haley Martin was hurt, as if it was his fault.

When he was not distracted by his own safety, all he could think about was the Canadian Foreign Minister insisting that Homeland wanted no part of negotiations with the ISA, who they considered a terrorist sponsoring state. Clarence's cyclical anxious thought patterns did nothing but increase the throbs of fatigue. He knew his blood pressure had to be running very high. Things were happening so fast. . . Nevertheless, he had to get some sleep.

"Wake up," Cade said. "You may be interested in this."

"Huh?" Clarence said, waking up.

The caption under the television screen said, "Elliot Dionne, Canadian Whistleblower, Windsor, Ontario".

"So? That don't affect us. I need rest."

"No, listen."

Dionne said, "Yes, I do believe that the Prime Minister of Canada should be investigated for un-Canadian activities. I know I was part of it, but it is wrong what we were asked to do by him."

"Did the Prime Minister tell you this directly?"

"No. . .not exactly."

The interviewer asked, "Don't you think that a lot of people will think that you are some kind of fringe extremist, just trying to make the Prime Minister look bad for political reasons?"

Dionne said, "Instead of psychoanalyzing me, why don't you go talk to Homeland? Or the ISA? I am just trying to make things right."

The reporter said, "Do you think that Canadians would believe you, or any of these factions, over our own Prime Minister?"

La Rata stepped up and took the mic. "Hey you stupid. . ."

Dionne put his hand over the microphone and whispered into Rata's ear.

Rata returned to the mic and said, "What I am trying to say is, Dionne is wanted for murder in the ISA. Do you think we would bring him all the way up here to tell some lie, if we didn't think it was true? How stupid do you think we are?" Rata looked at Dionne, "Come on, we gotta get out of here. You Canucks are stupid assholes. You

can't even see your Prime Jerk wants a damn war so they can take over what is left of America!"

Then the interviewer started to yell more loaded questions as they exited the screen. "How do we know you don't both are not more terrorists working for the ISA?"

Rata ran back to the microphone. "And you Canadians were stupid to give up your guns!" Then he hurried Dionne away and out the door of the television station.

Once the interviewer understood that Rata and Dionne were not going to talk any more, he turned to the camera. "There you have it, Elliot. Dionne claiming to be an agent of the Canadian Prime Minister, committing unsubstantiated terror crimes against the ISA. Back to you, Greta."

Clarence said, "If I hadn't read that file of Dull's, I would have never believed Canada could do such a thing. Now, I think it could be true. But those guys come across as being crazy." Clarence hopped up off of the bed. He began pacing the floor. "What does all this mean? What is going on?"

Cade said, "I'm no analyst, but I agree Canada wants to screw us. It seems a little unreal that they want to take over America, though. This is Canada we're talking here. But every country is capable of electing a dud leader. Look at some of the winners we've elected."

Clarence said, "I have to admit, you make some sense, but I am having a hard time wrapping my brain around a scenario where Canada is the bad guy. That would really change everything, and clearly not for the better."

Then the television announcer said, "We interrupt this program for a news flash from the Canadian Broadcast Network. A news reporter was standing near a sign that read, "US Border".

The field reporter said, "We are receiving reports that Homeland has used poison gas on the ISA sponsored terrorists who have occupied a power station in the Adirondacks. Critics say that while poison gas is never acceptable, an unnamed Homeland official gave a statement under anonymity; 'Homeland is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention, so there are no legal bounds to our military tactics. While we regret the necessity of having to use unconventional weapons against the terrorists, we affirm our resolve to use whatever means necessary to protect our interests'. We also found out there have been a number of deaths on both sides during the confrontation. Now with the terrorist attacks it is looking more and more like there is going to be all out war between our southern neighbors. Terrence Montgomery reporting; from the Homeland border."

Clarence said, "Power station? I'd sure like to know more about that! This is just great! If it isn't one bunch of treacherous bastards killing our mailmen, it's another bunch of creeps gassing our people, or killing our diplomats! Yet we are the freaking terrorists! What the hell are we supposed to do now?!"

The phone rang, as if right on cue.

"Harmon, here."

"Clancy, have you heard about the poison gas attack?"

He rubbed his head, causing all of his thin hair on top of his head to stand on end. "I'm afraid so, Bert."

"Well, that makes Homeland look bad, right?"

"Sure, in a way. But look, that is no angle I can get any traction with."

"What? You've got to be kidding. Why?"

"These days no one cares about 'humane warfare'. As long as we are seen as the belligerents, no one will care about the gas."

General Markle said, "On the plus side, the Marines are creating such a distraction that the Homeland's Army on the front is getting thin in a couple of spots. They have to be concerned with that."

"Okay, that is good to know, I guess. What do we do next?"

"The present deployment scenario won't last long. We need to move soon."

"We can't rush into a war!"

General Markle said, "Fine then, Clancy, call for talks. Act like a victim to the international community and we can get a better deal. I think we have a little leverage now."

Clarence sighed. "I don't know. . ."

"General Markle said, "So, what? We can't do anything?"

"Harmon, this is the President here. Harmon, what is your assessment?"

Clarence figured that the General got frustrated with him so the POTISA took over the phone. "With all due respect sir, we don't need a war right now over this. I hate the way this is going."

The President said, "What do we need, Harmon?"

"I am sick and tired of Homeland, but I am also sick and tired of kissing Canada's ass. I am ready to call them out."

The President said, "I'm not saying you're wrong, but before you do any of that, let us talk it over on our end. We'll get back with you within the hour."

"Yes sir, of course."

"Thank you, Harmon. You are doing a great service for all of us." the President said.

"Yes, sir. I appreciate your support." Clancy wondered if the compliment was sincere, or he was just being patted on the head to help him maintain composure.

A little while later, there was a knock on the door. Cade pulled his gun and was wary of being shot through the door, so he stood to the side and stretched as far as he could to still peek out of the peephole. "It's another RCMP, no wait, there's more of them."

Cade opened the door and six Royal Canadian Mounted Police poured in. The two of them suddenly grabbed Cade and another held Clarence.

"Hey!" Cade said. "What the hell do you think you're doing!?"

"We've got diplomatic immunity!" Clarence said.

Another RCMP, an officer who had a badge that indicated he was the rank of Commissioner, said, "You are under the arrest for the murder of Corporal Hailey Martin, and attempted murder of a hotel worker."

Cade said, "She's. . . Dead? You're charging me? How did you clowns get to that idea?!"

The Commissioner said, "Insulting us will not help the situation you are in."

"Situation?"

One of the Mounties pulled the pistol from Cade's holster.

"And we are also charging you with the possession of an illegal firearm."

Clarence said, "I don't believe you! We have the right to defend ourselves! You people sure are not doing a good job of it!"

The RCMP Officer said, "Are you serious? Did you hear what the charges were?"

"Yea, they are total rubbish!" Clarence said.

The officer holding Clarence said, "Sir, looks like we've also got them on drug charges!" He pointed at the still remaining traces of powdered sugar on Clarence's bed.

Clarence said, "That's not drugs! What is wrong with you guys?!" He jerked his arm away from the grasp of the Mountie. "Like I said, we are diplomats! If I were you, I'd call into your headquarters and ask, before you do something you'll regret."

"Are you threatening us?"

"Yea. . .Pretty much," Clarence said. "No! I am asking you to use your head!"

Cade protested, "I was there when the squad came and took Hailey to the hospital! Do a match on that pistol and you will see I didn't shoot her!"

The Officer said, "Take him out. I want to talk to Harmon some more."

The two Mounties took Cade out of the room.

Clarence said, "That was one big fat mistake. If you are smart, and I am only supposing that you are, you will bring him right back, no questions asked."

The Officer said, "I've heard that diplomatic immunity thing before. It's total crap, as far as I'm concerned."

"I don't much care what you think, or what happened. I will do my best to make sure that you are personally extradited to the ISA for kidnapping, which is a capital offense."

"Eh? You can't do that. I've heard enough here."

"So you're refusing to make the phone call?" Clarence pointed at the phone.

"Right now I am placing you under house arrest. Do not leave the room. You understand?"

"Where would I go? I have been trying to tell you people they are trying to kill me. I am even scared to order food."

"Don't worry, we will definitely be back."

Chapter 36

Adirondack Mountains, Homeland

Inside of the power station, troops were coughing and hacking, their lungs burning from exposure to the poison gas. Many were injured, some were dying. One open section of the station was turned into a temporary morgue to organize the dead into neat rank and file, in contrast to the living who were confounded by the situation and scattered everywhere.

"Where's Captain Shelby?" Major Crawford asked.

"KIA, sir," a soldier said.

Ayanna held her tongue. She studied and wrapped her cut hand, but instead of seeing the cut as damage, she saw it as a badge of honor in an action that saved her own life. But beyond that, there was nothing to celebrate. She had lost another Captain and many, if not most of her men. She took a deep breath. She thought would be too easy to blame things going bad on not being good enough to be an officer, or because of her gender. So Ayanna made the conscious decision to act in the best interest in her remaining men, even if it killed her. What would she do if she were a confident leader? Keep calm and take the first step. She said, "Okay men! Let's set up a defense all around this building. We are going to slug it out as best as we can." Then she heard some firing.

"Sir! A lieutenant said, "They're setting up positions all around us!"

Okay, men! Make your peace and let's give 'em a bloody nose!"

Overwhelming Homeland gunfire was zipping into the building, punching holes in walls and bouncing around, causing the Marines to lay low.

Ayanna clutched her helmet with the wrist of her bad hand and her rifle with the other one. She commanded over the noise, "Let's watch those doors and windows! Watch the areas they aren't shooting at, they will be coming in!"

In one of the rooms a grenade came through the window and bounced on the floor. One of the Marines took it upon himself to land on it to spare his comrades. The hero absorbed all of the fragmentations into his body, killing him instantly. Bullets were flying into the building from all sides.

Major Crawford had no plan. There were no more tricks left in the bag. The Marines were at the mercy of withering Homeland Gunfire. Homeland troops tried to get into the building through doors and windows. So far, their assault was stifled with defensive fire.

Ayanna thought that maybe now would be a good time to place a grenade in the power station control room and knock it out. She held the grenade and had her index finger on the pin. She pulled the pin and was ready to release the clip to make it live, when she realized the shooting went strangely quiet. The final breach of the defenses was not to come yet, because the Rebels had the high ground and caused the Homelander to cut and run.

Ayanna cautiously inserted the pin back into the hole on the grenade, and through the clip, which she was careful not to lose her grip. The grenade was now back in a stable condition. The station would not be destroyed yet.

Chapter 37

Outskirts of Detroit, Michigan

A large group of the Inspectors crowded around the Inspector General's staff car trying to hear what was being said over the radio on a Canadian station. Occasionally they would hear some news about the impending war, or ISA terrorists taking over the Homeland power station, but not much in the way of details. Nothing about Dionne and the postal killings.

Inspector Warfield said, "It has been a long time. Maybe we should go after them."

The Inspector General said, "We are going to need a pretty good reason to do that, since we don't have Dionne."

Inspector Ty Lynch told Inspector Padmore, "You know, all this waiting gives you time to think."

Padmore nodded.

Ty said, "If we end up going in there, it will be bad."

"It is what it is."

"Don't you worry about being killed?"

"Yea, I'm not stupid."

"What about your soul? You know. . .after you die?"

"I don't want to talk about it, okay? It's my business. Its personal."

"I didn't mean to upset you, Padmore. I just wanted to help you. I figured we were friends and all."

"Forget it."

Ty was surprised by the fact that no one wanted to hear about how Jesus could save their soul. Soul salvation is such a great thing that everyone would want it if they only took a minute to understand it.

But Ty realized that he must have been the most deluded person to think that people would eagerly flock to listen to him any more than they did all of the other devout

Christians who try to share their faith. But Ty decided that he could not allow people to slip into a Godless eternity without him peeping a word about God's simple Plan.

It seemed strange to him that the entire world was conditioned not to listen. Why did no one want to listen? They recoiled at the mere mention of the name of Jesus. Was this some sort of supernatural curse from the Devil? What would the world be like right now if the world would have listened? Would all the self inflicted trouble; the wars, or even the collapse have been avoided if man would have heeded the Bible? People all want their rights, or their "freedom". People want to do whatever they want apart from God's Word, which they see as a bunch of restrictions. But all they are doing, is giving themselves over to the slavery of evil and its horrible consequences.

Ty now understood now what Dr. Tammy White meant about "worldview". Ty figured that he was already developing a Christian worldview. Everything was different now. The more he contemplated what he read in the Bible, the more his understanding of the world's real motives became clear.

Ty also remembered another thing that Tammy said after his conversion, "God will hear your prayers now." There was no better time than now to start praying. He immediately went away from the crowd and commenced to pray for protection during the battle and for the salvation of his comrades.

The more of the Bible that Ty read, the less he was afraid. He didn't want to die, for sure, but if he were to give his life for a good cause, so be it. He knew that his final destination was secure. The key thing was that God owns the future. God knows the beginning and the end. The proof of the truth of the Bible is obvious to any who takes the time to check it out. Why wouldn't others want the same thing? Are they worried about what their friends will say? Their friends can't pay for their sins.

Over by the staff car, an Inspector said, "Look! Here comes Rata!"

The Inspector General got out of the car to take a look. "Hey! Where the hell is Dionne?! He got away! I knew that Rata guy would screw up! Damn! We better saddle up boys! Looks like we are going in!"

The men were moaning and cursing. Ty knew inside that he was ready for whatever came his way.

As Rata approached the car, the Inspector General asked, "Where's Dionne?"

"Back there."

"What happened?"

"He got away."

"Now you gotta go back there and get him! He is our only hope!"

Rata said, "In the first place, I don't know why you keep thinking you are my boss. I have no boss. In the second place we were already on TV."

The men started cheering.

Warfield said, "You were on TV?"

The Inspector General said, "I don't remember telling you that you were supposed to be on TV. Just Dionne."

"What did I just say? How much are you paying me? I am not your damn slave. You need to, like, trim that stupid hair out of your ears, or something," Rata said. "Anyway, I had to tell off the Canadians. When I tell someone off, they stay told off for the rest of their lives."

"Never mind that! Did Dionne get the message get out?!"

"Of course," Rata said. "You know, I get so sick and tired of everyone doubting me all the time. What's the damn deal?"

The Inspector General said, "Mission accomplished! Saddle up boys! We are going home!"

Inspectors were cheering and some were even jumping for joy. One by one, bike engines could be heard starting up.

Rata went to get into the car, muttering something about needing a superhero cape.

Chapter 38

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

The crowd out on the street had become huge. Cade figured that he would have to come up with some sort of disguise to get away from the whole mess.

A knock on the door came. Clarence peeped. It was Cade, along with three of the RCMP. He opened the door. "Welcome back."

The Commissioner had an armload of packages of powdered sugar donuts, which he laid on the bed. "I thought you might like these. We never really found any firearms on your associate. Right boys?"

"Right." "Yea." "Uh huh. No guns whatsoever."

"And we are holding that guy who was not really working for the hotel. We got some bad intelligence on that, you know." Then the Officer said, "I am going to leave all three of the guards here. Mr. Harmon, about the situation. . ."

"Don't worry about it. No questions asked," Clarence said.

The officer smiled. "You just call me if you need anything. Anything at all."

"Thank you."

The Commissioner left and the three extra guards settled in. One of them removed the chair that was jammed under the doorknob to the service door and said, "You won't be needing this under there any more, eh?"

Cade said, "If you guys don't mind, I'm really tired."

"No, you go ahead. No problem."

Clarence was also dead tired but had urgent work to do. He monitored the hotel room television for any news, and tried to come up with a conciliatory position statement for the Foreign Minister. He knew there was the problem of the ever-present ravenous media downstairs hoping and waiting. Clarence was grateful for the fact that no one from the hotel had given their room number to the zealous reporters.

Once Cade woke up, Clarence said, "Okay. I'm ready."

Cade sighed, "Do we have to? That last time was a big pain. I don't like being on TV anyhow."

"Why not?"

Cade clearly did not want to divulge what was the origin of his TV appearance phobia. "I'm ready when you are," he said. "Let one of the Mounties stay and guard the room."

Clarence said, "Sounds good. We'll take a couple of our guards along. It won't be bad. Let's take the stairs this time."

"No, let's save that move for an emergency," Cade said.

Clarence said, "That is all we have is emergencies."

"No, I mean a *real* emergency."

"Fine. I'm not picturing right now how bad your real emergency would look, but I'll defer to you on that."

They left the room and hopped on the same elevator. When the door opened, the crowd of reporters was dense and aggressive.

"Are you going to call back the terrorists invading Homeland?"

"Is the ISA going to allow UN troops into Ohio?"

"Is the ISA willing to take a common sense approach to negotiations?"

Clarence and Cade could barely move among the crush of reporters. A Hotel rep tried to direct Clarence to its podium. The Hotel's logo was splashed all over the background.

The RCMP guards were doing their best to push back the crowd.

Another reporter asked, "Is it true that Canada is involved in killing ISA letter carriers?"

"What?" Clarence couldn't believe his ears. He thought that all reporters were in the tank for Homeland and Canada. "You!" he said to the young, long-haired man, "I want to grant you an exclusive interview."

The other reporters became irate and were yelling even more.

"You heard him!" Cade said. "You! Follow us!"

They got back on the elevator with the single young looking, long haired reporter who was wearing thick glasses and carrying a case. Cade took the case and handed it to Clarence. Then began to frisk him.

"I don't have any weapons."

"He's good," Clarence said. "Let's just get back to the room."

The two Mounties blocked anyone from following them on the elevator. They quietly made their way back to the room. Cade took the reporter's case and was looking through it. Clarence and Cade each reclined on their beds. The reporter took a seat. "Thank you for this incredible opportunity. It will really put us on the map."

"Who are you?" Cade asked, handing him back his case containing his computer.

"Kyle Fuller."

Clarence asked, "Who do you work for?"

"Red Province News."

Clarence and Cade stared at him blankly.

"We're a blog. You know. . .on the internet?"

Clarence said, "Oh, yeah. . .they still have those?"

Kyle said, "Alive and well."

Clarence said, "I know it seems like we are asking all of the questions, but, how did you know about the postal killings?"

Kyle said, "Off of the internet. My partner sent me a text about a video of this guy on a Windsor local TV channel calling Canucks 'assholes'."

Clarence said, "We actually saw that, now that you mention it. It made the network news."

Kyle said, "Canadians are not really used to, as a Country, being called names. Plus the guy was pretty funny looking and acting, which is why it got so many hits. Anyway, the video has gone uber-viral. No one really took the actual content of the message seriously until the right wing opposition Conservative Party tried to make an issue out of it. A few of them subscribe to our blog. I can show you the video the Conservatives put out. They say they are calling for a full investigation of the Prime Minister. Anyway, going back to my original question, do you have anything to add to this?"

Clarence got into Dull's suitcase.

Cade said, "Don't do it."

Clarence said, "Use your brain, Cade. Right now is why the thing was written. What else do we have?"

Cade shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

Clarence handed the folder over to Kyle who was stunned when he saw the "top secret" on the cover.

"Whoa!" Kyle said.

Clarence said, "Use whatever you want."

He opened it up and started taking pictures with his phone. "You mind if I stay here and use your room for an office?"

Cade said, "I don't think that. . ."

Clarence said, "Cade! Do you want to take a chance that our information never gets out because he got mugged out in that mob?!" He told the reporter, "You can use that table over there."

"Thanks. That will be great."

Kyle started working quietly, writing his story based upon what was written in the folder. In a half hour he had his initial *Canadian Conspiracy to Start American War*, article written and published. The article mentioned that he had an exclusive interview and access to top secret documents. Then he urged his followers to spread the news on the social media sites.

Then over the next hour, Kyle kicked back in his chair and made some phone calls and did some texting.

"Holy Crap!" Kyle said, "We've gained five thousand followers in an hour!"

Clarence smiled. "The media is alive and well in Canada! I can't believe we are accomplishing a year's worth of diplomacy by sitting. . .laying or whatever in this room. Wow, this takes the pit right out of my gut."

The two Mounties returned from downstairs and took their seats. One of the RCMP started looking over Kyle's shoulder. Powdered sugar fell on the table as he munched on a donut. He smeared the confection on the table with his hand as he tried to wipe it off. Kyle was too happy to be annoyed by it.

Cade pointed at the Television. "Look. Look. Look."

The caption read at the bottom of the screen read, "Opposition Party Leader Calls for Full Investigation."

"Oh yeah!" Clarence said.

One of the RCMP guys slugged another one on the arm. "I told you, eh? You liberals are messed up in the head."

The liberal RCMP started arguing.

"Quiet!" Cade said, "we can't hear!"

The conservative Mountie started chuckling.

Clarence rolled his eyes at Cade's noisy yelling and the laughing.

Kyle said, "This article is majorly trending. We are getting hundreds of new followers each minute. Oooh! Here's a message from someone wanting to buy ads."

A little while later the phone rang.

"Harmon here."

"Clancy, there has been some developments. Canada is pretty pissed off. Your name came up. What is going on?"

"Hi Bert. How's the war going?" Clarence noticed his own feelings of cheeriness.

"Homeland is making some pretty strategically questionable moves right now. The window is open for a full-on advance by us. They have to be worried. Now. . . about. . ."

Clarence said, "Let me talk to the President. Right now."

"Um. . .I was just going to say. . ."

"The President, please."

"Okay, sure."

"This is the President."

"Sir. I think the war is basically over now."

The President said, "How? General Markle here says, in his words, now is the *geistzeit*. It is the time to attack. If we do, the war will just be starting."

Clarence said, "The Canadian Prime Minister is caught in cover up mode right now. The people of Canada are going to get loony once this information comes out into the mainstream. Just don't do anything militarily for at least a few hours. I mean. . . that is my recommendation, Sir. General Markle only has a hammer, and all he sees are nails everywhere."

"I'm not sure I understand it all, but we will sit tight for three hours. You have my word on it," the ISA Chief Executive said.

It was fun for Clarence and Cade to watch young Kyle being so excited about becoming a big deal, all in one day, while their own problems were clearing up.

Then the phone rang again.

"Harmon, here."

"This is Foreign Minister Youngblood. We are requesting that you come over to our building and apologize to Homeland because of you starting a war."

"We can't do the apology, because it isn't true. But we were wrong to fight them. My own personal opinion is, we should be kicking your ass instead. And as far as coming over there, I don't think so. I'm doing pretty well from this room. But I do need something from you."

Youngblood said, "You're insane Harmon! You have no bargaining position here. We. . . or Canada, can just put the word out that we have uncovered information, that. . .a third party of political radical ideologues tried to start a war between the ISA and Homeland."

"That is kind of a horrible offer on your part, Minister. You know I could go all out and publicly ask for some reparations and all sorts of things because of your inept administration. Everyone elects some bad leaders from time to time. Canadians could eventually forget all about you guys, or save face by throwing you into prison."

"Forget about trying to scare me. You have no idea how much power we really have," Youngblood said. "You know very well where I am going with this, now let's wrap it up."

Clarence said, "We want full diplomatic recognition from Canada."

"Done. Mr. Ambassador."

Clarence did a quiet fist pump.

"We want navigation through St. Lawrence."

"Done as well."

The reporter, Kyle Fuller, started licking his chops and wringing his hands at what must be another blockbuster exclusive story once the phone call concluded.

"We need a few other things. . ." Clarence said.

Chapter 39

Adirondack Mountains, Homeland

The fog of war had fully manifest itself at the power station. Tear gas had been thrown into the building, along with flashbangs. Shooting had gone down to sporadic. But now the enemy was upon them. The sound of the dreaded helicopters thumped their way toward the station for good measure.

It seemed to Ayanna that now it was just a matter of Homelanders walking around and putting bullets into the heads of her men. In minutes it would be her final fight. They had already lost the battle. Her only hope was that their efforts here had resulted in the rest of the ISA Armed Forces gaining an advantageous situation, whereby they could win the war. They had done their jobs, paying the full price.

She thought to herself, why would God spare her, the child of a murderous cannibalistic clan? Why would he not purge her as the aberrant perversion that she knew she was? Perhaps God did not want her to live to have children. Maybe her offspring would grow up to become the scourge of the earth. She just wished she could hear her adoptive mother, Amy Crawford, call her "Lil Darlin'" one more time.

Among the moans of pain, and soldiers crying for help she heard, "Sir! Sir!" It never occurred to her that they were calling for her. Ayanna had nothing left anyhow.

"Rear Admiral!"

"Huh?" she snapped out of it, upon hearing the distinctive nickname.

"Helicopters! They're Canadians!"

The noise of the three large transport helicopters was deafening as two of them landed. A Canadian with a white flag of truce hopped out. He made his way to the building. He met Ayanna at the door. "Major! The war is over! We're here to pick you all up!"

Ayanna said, "Let's get these wounded on board! Move!"

While they were loading the helicopters, no one shot at them. Ayanna checked the building for any more passengers. She found a wounded Marine in a corner of a room. She helped drag him onto the last helicopter. They got onboard and collapsed.

While they flew away, she saw the Marine who called her "Rear Admiral".

Ayanna asked, "Does everyone call me that?"

The Marine said, "Look at the back of your helmet, sir."

She pulled it off with her good hand and saw that it said in small white paint letters, "REAR ADM."

She left the helmet off and shut her eyes to rest. She said quietly to herself, "I love you idiots."

Epilogue

"Phil! Don't say that!" Amy said to Phil Crawford as he lay in his bed. Jayden and Ella Phipps stood quietly by, along with Doctor Williams.

"Hush now," Phil said, struggling to get the words out. "It's my time, Babe."

"No." Amy was shaking. Sobbing. Clutching his hand with both of hers. "You don't know any such thing. That's crazy talk."

Phil said, "Don't worry. I'm happy. . . to go see my maker now. God has been so good to us. The people worked with us. The crops came up every year. I never could'a had a better wife than you, Babe. And I never could'a had a better friend than you, Jayden. And I know our children, 'cept my hunting partner. . . they're in God's Heaven right now. I know. . . they died. . . honorably. I will see 'em. . . soon. Tell 'Yanna I love her."

Amy cried as Phil spoke. "Stop talking, Phil! Stop talking!" Their children, except their adopted daughter, Ayanna, had been out of contact since the collapse. Even after the mail delivery came back into existence, the letters from them never came.

"I . . . see. . . Jesus." Phil Crawford, a simple man, who had meant so much to so many people, passed on quietly to his eternal reward.



It was Elijah's quiet place. He sat on the ground next to the simple gravesite with two sticks for a cross. There laid his former partner as a Detroit Policeman, Henry Miller.

"Henry, you dumb son of a bitch. I wish you would have made it. We still could have had a lot of good days. You had to keep on soldiering and getting shot at. I told you not to keep doing that stuff. I miss you, Bro. Dumbass, I don't know why you had to leave me. Hey man. I found my grandson. I found him. . ." Elijah sobbed at the gravesite which he later returned to often, giving essentially the same speech each time. Elijah and his wife, Dr. Aliyah Williams lived many more years and saw their grandson grow into a quiet young man, who became a brilliant criminal investigation forensics expert.



Ty Lynch came back to Crawfordton for Dr. Tammy White. After passing her stringent tests, she started to see admirable qualities about him. There was a long courtship involved. But Tammy told Ty that her biological clock had run out and she didn't care about marriage any more. Undeterred, Ty told her he would quit his job as a Postal Inspector and they could get a farm and adopt children to raise together.

Tammy admired Ty's tenacity and finally consented to marry him in an enormous church wedding attended by the whole town of Crawfordton.

Rata famously said, "I knew they were meant for each other all along. If you combine Ty and Tammy, you get. . . Tammy, I guess."

In all, the Lynches adopted seventeen orphaned children from all over the area, influencing their young lives all for good.

La Rata turned down numerous job offers of all kinds, and retired to his farm. He became Ty's best friend. Rata was an extremely popular "uncle" to all of the children.



Logan "Angel" Howard left on a missionary journey into the vast untamed western expanse of America and was never seen nor heard from again. The Church Angel started in Crawfordton continued to grow, with medical doctor Mitch Braun becoming the very capable Pastor.



Major Ayanna Crawford married an Army officer, Captain Hunter Thomas, a childhood friend. Together they had three remarkably talented children, Phillip, Elijah, and Amy.

Ayanna Thomas's legacy grew exponentially. Her exploits as a child, being the clan huntress and later as the daring Ohio Marine Corps officer were a source of pride throughout the Independent States.

After a "Draft Ayanna" movement, Ayanna capitalized on her fame and later became the fifth President of the Independent States of America. Together with the renown diplomat, Vice President Clancy Harmon, the duo lead the nation into its new golden age of reconstruction.

THE END

Dear Reader;

Thank you for reading the Kings and Clans Trilogy. To share this work with others; please consider leaving a rating and review online, and recommend the book to others.

Best Wishes,

Den